"That's me trying to step out of that sentence"

An Approach

to Some Recent New Zealand Poetry

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J.G.H. Newton

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses itself to changes which came over New Zealand poetry in the early 1970s. It discusses in detail the work of three poets whose public careers began in this period: Ian Wedde, Murray Edmond and Bill Manhire. Its perspective also necessitates the inclusion of one poet from either side of this chronological site: it opens by considering James K. Baxter and closes with a look at Leigh Davis. My focus is on the arrangement of pronouns, and on the way in which particular pronominal formations evolve through the work of these five poets.

I begin with Baxter, and concentrate on his late work, in the belief that we can see emerging there a new pronoun structure which resembles that which is most characteristic of the early Seventies.

Wedde and Edmond are discussed in tandem. The work of each is divided in two, and I attempt to locate a switch in direction which both undertake in mid-career and which is marked by a shift in the orientation of their pronouns. Manhire's work is then examined, firstly to see where it departs from that of his contemporaries, but later (and more significantly) to see to what extent it confirms that pattern just outlined.

Turning my attention to Davis, I once again examine the pronouns used and consider their relation to his critique of expressivity. His attitude to Baxter and Wedde (as well as to Allen Curnow) is pursued with an eye for the implications of Davis's innovations as well as for certain continuities between himself and his precursors.

INTRODUCTION

Casting about for some textual nugget which might offer a way of introducing this thesis, I have settled finally on a pair of comments by Murray Edmond on James K. Baxter. I first came across them while reading through Edmond, Wedde, Manhire, Brunton and others, looking for a way to marshal a response that might begin to account for the pleasure I derived from Seventies poetry. The small revisionist anecdote which these two statements constellate did much to shape my subsequent thinking about this project.

The first is from 1973 and an interesting essay called "The Idea of the Poet":

> Thus to me, despite so much in Baxter that is antiquated or retrogressive, the piety, the puritanism, the mysogyny, he does stand at the threshold of poetry in this country. He presents to poets a provocation, a direction; so much so in fact that now and in the future it will be necessary for all New Zealand poets to work out where they stand in relation to Baxter.[1]

Ten years later, writing about *Freed*, Edmond imparts to his story a suggestive shift of emphasis:

> At that time [during the life of *Freed*] Baxter's last book had been *Pig Island Letters* and, good though the title sequence was, Baxter's writing, with its curiously nineteenth century inversions of syntax and its moral/religious concerns centred on the Catholic church and its rather archaic vocabulary and antiquated verse machinery made him seem a relic of the past. When the *Jerusalem Sonnets* came out they did not make the immediate impact on me or my work that they have since made on Stead and others. Perhaps if the poems in *Runes* had been

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1 Murray Edmond, "The Idea of the Poet", *Cave* 4, p. 37.

> collected and published at that time I would have found Baxter's work of more significance. I had that volume with me in England in 1974 and 1975 and those are still the poems of his I go back to most. But generally, at the time of *Freed*, Baxter was just the rent collector.[2]

Plainly both statements harbour major equivocations, but Edmond's revisionism has severely edited Baxter's importance to him. From standing "at the threshold of poetry in this country", Baxter has been demoted to "just the rent collector".

At the time of writing there is little on offer by way of systematic attempts to historicise Seventies poetics. This is not unrelated, I suspect, to the fact that we have not yet seen a retrospective Seventies anthology.[3] Scattered around, however, we can see at least the makings of a (critical) fiction about the period.[4] It seems to be generally agreed, for

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2 Murray Edmond, "Creating a Potent Image", *Span* 16/17, p. 61.

3 As I write, however, *The Caxton Press Anthology: New Zealand Poetry 1972-1986*, ed. Mark Williams (Christchurch: Caxton, 1987) is just about to appear, and a further anthology edited by Ian Wedde is rumoured to be near completion.

4 The material I have been conscious of would include the following, here divided crudely into "primary" and "secondary" material. PRIMARY: the five issues of *Freed* (1969-72), and especially the editorial statements by Brunton in 1 and 2, and Edmond in 3; *The Young New Zealand Poets*, ed. Arthur Baysting (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), and especially the introductions to their own work by the individual poets; Edmond, "The Idea of the Poet". SECONDARY: Kendrick Smithyman's afterword in Baysting; C.K. Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos", *Islands* 27, pp. 467-486; Edmond, "Creating a Potent Image"; Allen Curnow, "Olson as Oracle", *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, ed. Peter Simpson (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987), pp. 305-318; Ian Wedde's introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, ed. Harvey McQueen and Wedde (Auckland: Penguin, 1985), pp. 23-52; a series of articles by Roger Horrocks, including "No Theory Permitted On These Premises", *And* 2, pp. 119-137, and "'"Natural" as only you can be': Some Readings of contemporary N.Z. Poetry", *And* 4, pp. 101-123. In an area as yet so sketchily mapped, the hum of informal conversation has also had a major effect on my thinking; in particular I should

instance, that between about 1967 (the year that Robin Dudding took over the editorship of *Landfall*), and 1973 and the appearance of Arthur Baysting's *The Young New Zealand Poets*, an eruption took place which transformed the face of local poetry. *Freed* is understood to have been catalytic, and has been valorised as the re-embodiment of *Phoenix*, initially by its own editors and later by C.K. Stead.[5] There seems to be agreement about a range of factors which contributed to a climate conducive to such an upheaval: the demographic "given" of the Baby Boom, the war in Vietnam, developments in printing technology, and (most famously) the importation of "the American model". Similarly, repeated themes make themselves heard as writers try initially to predict and then later to describe changes in the writing itself. It has been claimed of the work of these "young New Zealand poets" that it cultivates a more inclusive attitude towards its audience, that it is more expansive (and oriented towards the demotic) in its treatment of language as a resource base, that it is informed by an unprecedented interest in "theory", and that it is alienated from Curnow's discourse of the local.

Though all these assertions are problematic, and some of them extremely so, they do all afford at least a certain leverage. But having picked my way through this *de facto* fiction, I was struck by its failure to address itself to two issues in particular. Firstly, where did Baxter fit in? It seemed to me that to focus exclusively on the impact of that Baby Boom generation was to run the risk of displacing an

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mention a seminar conducted by Bill Manhire at the University of Canterbury, 11/9/86.

5 Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos", p. 475.

initiative that might be in certain respects attributable to Baxter. Were the imperatives of the later Baxter a matter of indifference to his younger successors, or did he, as Edmond at first suggests, present "a provocation, a direction"? I was not so much interested in whether or not Baxter "influenced" the likes of Wedde and Edmond; I was curious, however, about the extent to which that subsequent sea-change in local poetics might be implicit in late Baxter as much as in the *Freed* writers. Secondly, it seemed to me impossible to account for the novel flavour of Seventies poetry without facing up to and trying to account for its confessive-looking intimacy, its "personalism".

It is here that I first fixed on Edmond's revisionism. That Baxter had come to embarrass Edmond enforced my suspicion that the two must have something in common. And I was interested to notice the Jerusalem Baxter turning to a new arrangement of pronouns which seemed not unlike that "I" and "you" so prominent in the earlier Edmond and Wedde. These pronouns, I was convinced, were the key to understanding that new Seventies personalism; now I wondered if they might not also open up that relationship between these younger poets and Baxter.

To talk about "the young New Zealand poets", then, it seemed I was going to have to start further back. Moreover, it was now becoming clear that I was going to have to venture forwards as well, for what Edmond's revised thinking seemed to reflect was the pressure of a new generation of discourse; in short, if I wished to understand how these Seventies poets later came to view their own work, I could see no way to avoid

fronting up to Leigh Davis. The result, then, is a thesis "about" the Seventies which deploys the greater part of its bulk outside that decade.

Writing about Edmond, Wedde and Manhire is a joy, not just because I enjoy their work, but also because they are so responsive to changes in the discursive atmosphere. Edmond has already shown us as much, fulfilling his own prediction as he continues to work at working out where he stands in relation to Baxter. Because of this responsiveness (Wedde in *Earthly* quotes Robert Duncan: "Responsibility is to keep / the ability to respond") their development serves as the register of a changing climate. Without their alertness, as without the theorising zeal of Davis, none of what follows would have been imaginable.

This, I believe, is another way of saying that Edmond writing about Baxter dramatises the way that literary history is arrived at. Inevitably, that is, any contribution will be made by that impacting of informational pressures which is usually denoted by that tricky word "self", a subject registering imperatives which will always be particular and to a certain extent unfathomable. Edmond's historicisation is of this kind, and so is that historicising narrative which inhabits this thesis.

The metaphor "trajectory" may have a debased ring, but I still find its ambiguities useful. It is commonly employed, that is, to refer to "historical" developments that can be traced or plotted. But if I think I am "plotting" a trajectory, then I must recognise that I am certain to fall to conniving and aggressive double-dealing; if I think I am

"tracing" one, I must anticipate that before all else I will trace the shape of my own desire. Those texts which I choose to write my own text on top of are, I believe, best understood simply as stockpiles of available signifiers waiting to be mobilised in the dreamwork of "practical criticism". Thus "the Seventies" as an historicising lever becomes highly unreliable, and as often as I invoke this rubric it must be in full acknowledgement of this problem of libido and subjectivity: that definite article, in other words, must be read as giving way to "a" or, better, "my".

Another ambiguous metaphor: I want to "open up" the decade. First of all I mean of course that I am not intending to force a closure or expecting to say the definitive word; I merely wish to try out a paradigm which might make certain features of this writing more accessible. I am reminded, however, of that passage from Magaret Atwood's novel, *Bodily Harm*, where the protagonist wonders if her lover told her, "I want to be the one you open up for", or "I want to be the one who opens you up".[6]

If this thesis wields a can-opener, a chainsaw, a "presiding metaphor", then it revolves (as its Wedde-derived title suggests) around the figurative implications of the sentence. This bearing down of a subject on a predicate (more often, in these pages, an "object") is the kernel of that structuring of power which is discourse. It supplies us with that damning adjective, "sententious". It is also an act of penal speech (we can bridge the two senses with the pejorative "magisterial").[7] In the chapters which follow, then, I wish to

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6 Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 106.

pursue this arrangement of "I" in relation to "you" as it evolves through the work of five poets: Baxter, Edmond, Wedde, Manhire and Davis.

Certain perils inherent in this procedure will, I have no doubt, be readily apparent. Most obviously, I am proffering an inquiry into authority which discusses a lineage of exclusively male poets and yet refuses to talk, by name, about gender. To try to justify this, I can only invoke the friendlier implications of that "opening up" metaphor. If I am endeavouring to "erect" a paradigm, it is only as a structure which I hope it might be interesting to interrogate. If in respect of gender it at present pursues sameness, it does so in anticipation of the impact of difference. Having to start somewhere, I decided to begin with the clearest continuity I thought I could discern, and "the Seventies", as presently recognised by "the canon", is a strikingly male phenomenon. Why that should be so is a demanding question which I have not undertaken to answer here. In not doing so, of course, I am acceding to that canon. I see no reason not to state plainly that the three Seventies poets on whom I concentrate here are those who (for whatever complex and impure reasons) I personally find to be the most sustaining. But clearly a paradigm fashioned around these writers will inevitably change shape when pressured with different work, and it may well contract into a useful way of talking about only a particular poetic sub-culture. The most I can hope is that such pressure might seem worth exerting, and hence that this model, which seeks after all to account for how language orchestrates power,

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7 See Roland Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers", *Image-Music-Text* (Fontana, 1977), p. 191.

might yet offer something to a discourse focussed on gender.

If a project such as this is implacably canonical, then it may justly be held accountable for its manifold exclusions. Again, though, I have had to begin somewhere, faced as I am with a vast expanse of territory which our (local) criticism has somehow contrived to ignore: in short, I mean the very existence of the pronoun. If at times, then, I resort to generalisations which may be less than watertight, I would argue that this is inevitable given that I have so few points of reference which previous explorations, had there been any, might have permitted me to assume.

I am thinking here particularly of what happens prior to Baxter. There simply has not been room or time to talk in detail about, for instance, pronouns in Curnow. Nor have I been able, much as I would like, to talk except in passing about the Bethell of the memorials and the letter poems, the Hyde of *Houses by the Sea*, or Mary Stanley's formidable single volume. I suspect that this line of descent may be home to a set of pronouns more like those we meet in the Seventies than is anything to be found in the work of their male contemporaries. Nor have I found room for more than a brief acknowledgement of Alistair Campbell, and none at all for Owen Leeming's long "confessional"[8] poem, "The Priests of Serrabonne". Moving closer to the present, it would be interesting and pertinent to see how the model I am proposing would shape up if that focal position I have afforded to Edmond, Wedde and Manhire were allocated instead to David

Footnotes

8 "[C]onfessional" is Charles Doyle's diagnosis in the introduction to his anthology, *Recent Poetry in New Zealand* (Auckland: Collins, 1965), p. 15.

Mitchell or Alan Brunton, or to Christina Beer or Jan Kemp. Again, in the later Seventies, would my tactics offer any useful insights into the work of Elizabeth Smither, Rachel McAlpine, Meg Campbell or Michael Harlow? Given the weight which I place on the sentence, I should like to have been able to talk about Kendrick Smithyman and his tortuous syntax. And what if in place of Davis I had focussed on Joanna Paul, Keri Hulme, Janet Charman, Heather McPherson, Michele Leggott or John Dickson?

These names which I am throwing about so freely are not meant to flesh out some canonical roll-call and thus create yet one more set of omissions. I am merely trying to give some indication of the extent of my investigation's necessary exclusions, and of how vulnerable and potentially unstable that picture which it produces must be. Of course I can also be more optimistic and suggest that perhaps these exclusions might indicate the scope of the model's potential applications. Either way, my hope remains that this project will raise more questions than it answers, and that some of those questions might seem interesting enough to be worth asking.

CHAPTER 1

FROM AKITIO TO JERUSALEM

The great poets are also to be known by the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor. Then folks echo a new cheap joy and a divine voice leaping from their brains: How beautiful is candor! All faults may be forgiven of him who has perfect candor.

Walt Whitman, *Preface 1855*

...Jerusalem is a ghost settlement by a river, formed once in a series of sonnets.

Leigh Davis, *Willy's Gazette*

i) *The geography master*

In "From Wystan to Carlos", C.K. Stead describes what he sees as the turning point in Baxter's career:

> By the late fifties his simple poetics of "ideas" "sharpened" by the "tool" of "verse-form" had run him into the turgidities of his 1959 collection *In Fires of No Return*. And perhaps he perceived -- in the twilight way Baxter did perceive theoretical matters -- that there wasn't a poetic vocation to be made of cheap fiction in verse. He needed a new start, and he made one by putting himself (or *a* self) squarely into the centre of the poems.[1]

I have chosen this statement as a point of departure, not just because the behaviour of subject pronouns will be the guiding preoccupation of this thesis, but also because that revision of strategy which Stead believes he can detect in Baxter bears (at least at first glance) a strong resemblance to a characteristic gesture of the *Freed* generation. What I wish to do in this chapter is to examine that new kind of pronoun formation which has encouraged Stead to talk about this pushing of self into the poems' centre; later, then, we will be able to measure the behaviour of Baxter's subject pronoun against pronouns used by Edmond, Wedde and Manhire. Firstly, however, we will need to consider those "turgidities" to which Stead refers: in other words, what is it exactly which makes this "new start" so essential? While this will largely be no more than an exercise in the rehearsal of the critical opinions of others, it will at least allow me to set before us the pronoun strategies

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1 Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos", 479.

governing Baxter's earlier work, which in turn will furnish a context in which we can discuss innovations in the *Jerusalem Sonnets*.

To begin, though, let us pursue this context back into the previous generation, for the two arrangements of pronouns most characteristic of the first third of Baxter's career are present in almost identical shape in the earlier Curnow, and in Fairburn, respectively.[2] The first of these is that statutory vehicle of the poet as teller of nationwide truths:

> In your atlas two islands not in narrow seas
> Like a child's kite anchored in the indifferent blue....[3]

This "Statement" from Curnow supplies the metaphor with which I mean to label this structure: behind these lines and their imperative demeanour stands the figure of the schoolmaster (Open your atlas!) visiting his authority on a captive audience. This figure, himself schooled in Auden, teaches in a number of departments; his specialist subject, however, is mythic geography.[4]

It is important to note how muted is the "I" that would

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2 I have in mind a division much like that implicit in Stead, whereby everything up to and including *In Fires of No Return* (1958) becomes "early", *Howrah Bridge* (1961), *Pig Island Letters* (1966) and the posthumous *Runes* (1973) become "middle", and the Jerusalem work is designated "late".

3 Allen Curnow, *Collected Poems 1933-73* (Wellington: Reed, 1974), p. 55.

4 For example, Auden's poem "Consider" offers both the same imperative tone and the same elevation of perspective: "Consider this and in our time / As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman...." (W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* [London: Faber, 1976], p. 61). For "mythic geography", and also perhaps Curnow's model for the resurrection of the sestina, see for example "Paysage Moralisé", p. 61.

designate that lecturing voice. The poem's implied constituents are that "I" who speaks, and a broad public audience ("You at the desk and in the street", "Inheritors of an unrejoicing strength") whose job it is to listen. The poem's pretence is that it can forge subject and object into a single collective "we"; at that stage it will claim to have arrived at a statement of truth which will hold for "us" as a people. The need to bury that "I" in the mix, then, has something to do with the insecurities of nationalism, and especially, perhaps, of a nationalism which is also an imperialism. In other words, who *is* that "us"; on whose behalf does this poem claim to speak? To pursue the matter directly to the heart of pakeha nationalism's governing blindness, what particularities of perspective are necessary for the hills to appear nameless and the cities to cry out for meaning?[5] It is necessary, then, that this "I" be damped down, lest it confess the relative nature of the perspective organising this broad-canvas pedagogy. What right does "I" have to lay down those imperatives: "So much ... you may call your own", "look upward", "Take courage"; who is "I" to speak on behalf of "the county chairman and the airman in blue", and if these are the poem's assumed constituents then what kinds of people does that tribal "we" exclude; in short, by what authority is it that "I" can claim to "sing *your* agonies"? An habitual effacement of that "I", and of the particulars of its relationship to the author and to "you-the-audience", is a way of attempting to

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5 For a more detailed interrogation of the interests served by nationalist ideology, see Stevan Eldred-Grigg's review of Keith Sinclair's *A Destiny Apart* (*Landfall* 162, pp. 222-228) to which I am indebted here.

deflect this question and to cast the poem, not as subjective opinion, but rather as the utterance of disembodied Truth.

This is where we meet the early Baxter:

High Country Weather

Alone we are born
And die alone;
Yet see the red-gold cirrus
Over snow-mountain shine.

Upon the upland road
Ride easy stranger:
Surrender to the sky
Your heart of anger.[6]

Though that nationalist focus is much less evident, the poem still wants to paint a broad, tribal canvas; its implicit "I" forces itself on "you", the stranger, in the wedlock of that first-person plural ("Alone *we* are born"), thus raising again those nasty questions about the authority by which it assumes, firstly that constituency itself, and secondly the right to berate it with imperatives: "Ride easy"! "Surrender"! *In Fires of No Return*, which Stead mentions, condenses what I have referred to as the first third of Baxter's career, reprinting some of his earliest poems (including "High Country Weather") and reaching forward to collect for the first time pieces from the late 1950s. Turning, then, to the end of that volume and one of those more recent poems, we find the same field of inquiry, the same pronouns, the same implied constituency, and the same imperatives.[7] Here are the first and final stanzas of

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6 James K. Baxter, *Collected Poems*, ed. J.E. Weir (Wellington: Oxford University Press), p. 34. [Hereafter this volume is referred to as "C.P.".]

7 Again, note that echo of Auden ("Consider...."), possibly picked up by way of Curnow.

"At Akitio":

> Consider this barbarian coast,
> Traveller, you who have lost
> Lover or friend. It has never made
> Anything out of anything.
> Drink at these bitter springs.
>
> ....
>
> Pluck then from ledges of the sea
> Crayfish for the sack. Not now but later
> Think what you were born for. Drink
> Child, at the springs of sleep.[8]

We can also observe in this poem the (perhaps increasing) difficulty which that "I" is having in smuggling its utterance into the collective, of inflating an admittedly "*single* grief" into "Emblems of *our* short fever". This difficulty manifests itself in the kinds of turgidities which I imagine Stead is thinking of:

> This gullied mounded earth, tonned
> With silence, and the sun's gaze
> On a choir of breakers, has outgrown
> The pain of love. Drink
> Traveller, at these pure springs.
>
> Remember, though, the early strength
> Of bull-voiced water when the boom broke
> And eels clung to the banks, logs
> Plunged and pierced the river hymen.[9]

What does it mean, precisely, to say that "This gullied mounded earth... / ... / ...has outgrown the pain of love"? This pathetic fallacy appeals to the idea of an essential truth, immanent in the landscape, which might somehow entitle "I" to speak on behalf of "we". The epistemological tenuousness of

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8 C.P., p. 184-185
9 C.P., p. 185.

this notion can be felt behind the kind of gross overstatement -- the adjectives made from fabricated verbs ("gullied", "tonned / With silence"), the apparently random accumulation of metaphors, the macho histrionics of those plunging logs -- with which the poem labours to force that consummation in the plural.

"At Akitio" illustrates succinctly what I imagine Ian Wedde has in mind when he refers to the presence in the earlier Baxter of "an insecure hieratic tone committed to abstractions", a tone which, by virtue of what he describes earlier in his *Penguin* introduction as "an atrophy of the sense of will-to-language", will later give way to a more finely tuned and relaxed integration of hieratic and demotic utterance.[10] This hieratic/demotic distinction, which Wedde borrows from Northrop Frye[11] has an obvious application to the pedagogy of the geography master; "hieratic", by derivation, means "priestly", thus connoting not only the authoritarian assumptions of that "I", but also its shrouding in mysterious occlusion of that chain of command from whence derives its right of truth-telling. To speak, then, of the hieratics of the geography master is not necessarily to mix one's metaphors.[12]

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10 Introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, pp. 24, 43.

11 "...where 'hieratic' describes language that is received, self-referential, encoded *elect*, with a 'high' social threshold emphasising cultural and historical continuity; and where 'demotic' describes language with a spoken base, adaptable and exploratory codes, and a 'lower' and more inclusive social threshold emphasising cultural mobility and immediacy". (*Penguin* introduction, p. 25.)

12 In Curnow, perhaps there has always been a sense in which poetry functions as a displaced priesthood. Thus the "raised voice" of the geography master is also the voice of the priest and of Father (see *The Loop in Lone*

Bill Manhire's "editorial" figure is designed to account for much the same behaviour.[13] Manhire on Baxter closely resembles Stead in that he is arguing on behalf of a poetics of the concrete and against "an excess of public declamation". Accordingly he finds early Baxter to be blighted by a weakness for "lofty abstracted wisdom, which isn't quite guaranteed by the detail of event and feeling round about....", while that later work which he favours is seen to be more concrete, detailed, grounded, factual, and at the same time less "sententious".[14]

Manhire, then, supplies a useful gloss which we can bring back to Wedde's "hieratic insecurity". That is to say, the insecurity that informs Baxter's hieratic manner is two-fold. Firstly, there is an epistemological insecurity: the poems' "wisdom" is of an "abstract" kind, insufficiently "guaranteed" by phenomena.[15] What kind of knowledge, precisely, is distilled in the announcement that "From the hills no dream but death frowns",[16] or "For us the land is matrix and destroyer",[17] or "This gullied mounded earth ... / ... / ...has outgrown the pain of love", or any other of those dozens, probably hundreds, of similarly ponderous aphorisms? What does it mean, and more to the point, *how does it mean it*?

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Kauri Road [Auckland: Auckland/Oxford, 1986], pp. 9-10).

13 Bill Manhire, "Events & Editorials: Baxter's *Collected Poems*", *Islands* 31/32, p. 106.

14 Manhire, "Events & Editorials", pp. 108, 111, 112.

15 cf. Wedde: "an insecure hieratic tone *committed to abstractions*"; and elsewhere, "he would use [hieratic language] to ferry *remarkably vague abstractions* in on you" (Harry Ricketts, *Talking About Ourselves: Twelve New Zealand Poets in conversation with Harry Ricketts* [Wellington: Mallinson Rendell, 1986], p. 44), my italics.

16 "Prelude N.Z.", C.P., p. 17.

17 "Poem in the Matukituki Valley", C.P., p. 86.

Baxter's response to this thorny interrogative tends to be simply to say it again, ever more decoratively and resoundingly. In other words, and secondly, that epistemological insecurity betrays itself in an insecurity of tone, as if what the poems lack in substance can be made up for in volume, in authoritative delivery. Along with "editorial", Manhire's typical signals here are "lofty", "rhetorical", "sententious"; for Wedde, "a hieratic tone, very orotund and often very tedious" generates "a rather spurious authority"[18] -- "spurious", that is, because its hold on the "true" is anchored, not by rigours of perception, but merely by an inflated manner of broadcast. This conflation of "hieratic" and "insecure" accounts for that defensiveness we have noted, a habit of resorting to rhetorical bluster in an attempt to disguise an epistemological bankruptcy.

Before abandoning this filling out of our stable of available critical metaphors, we should observe that the Stead quote with which I began does not represent his first attempt to locate and characterise that pivotal point in Baxter's career. In an essay first published in 1973, he detects in the Indian poems of *Howrah Bridge* (1961) the emergence of "a new voice ... which for lack of another word I will call that of the mature Baxter". The work performed later by the pejorative "turgidities" falls in this earlier version to a metaphor from Yeats:

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18 Ricketts, *Talking About Ourselves*, p. 46.

> Baxter is coming down off his high romantic stilts -- not a stylistic event, not the result of a decision to write differently, but a development in the man's confidence, in his belief that he can be seen to exist without trappings.[19]

In fact, read closely, this passage divulges not one Yeatsian metaphor but two. This "belief that he can be seen to exist without trappings" (cf. "putting himself ... squarely into the centre of the poems") paraphrases Yeats's famous "A Coat": Baxter gets down off his stilts, that is, by learning to walk naked.[20] Those high romantic stilts afford a dual elevation: they elevate the voice above the ground of the "real", transporting it into the cloudy realms of the abstract, and they elevate the poet above the reader, subjugating the latter by investing the former with that mystifying, priestly/schoolmasterly authority. When Stead talks about "Those orotund Baxterian roundings-off" in the context of a typical early Baxter poem's "forced march to a moral

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19 C.K. Stead, Towards Jerusalem: The Later Poetry of James K. Baxter, *Islands* 3, p. 10.

20 *A Coat*

> I made my song a coat
> Covered with embroideries
> Out of old mythologies
> From heel to throat;
> But the fools caught it,
> Wore it in the world's eyes
> As though they'd wrought it.
> Song, let them take it,
> For there's more enterprise
> In walking naked.

The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London: MacMillan, 1971), p. 142. The "stilts" metaphor appears in various places in Yeats, including the poem called "High Talk" (*Collected Poems*, p. 385), and in his 1936 introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (ed. John Hollander, *Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism*, p. 86).

conclusion"[21] he is identifying precisely that two-fold insecurity described above by Wedde and Manhire. Because they are epistemologically vague (that "simple poetics of 'ideas' 'sharpened' by the 'tool' of 'verse-form'") Baxter's pronouncements of collective wisdom drive him to defensive, authoritarian postures. Later, however, that "walking nakedness" will offer, not only a grounding in the real, but also respite from that sententiousness.

Before we consider exactly what generates this vision of Baxter walking naked, we have a second early pronoun formation to consider; here an "I", pushed further forward, addresses a more specific "you" designating not a stranger but a lover.[22] This more personal arrangement would seem to imply a repudiation of the habits of the geography master, and even, perhaps, a stripping naked of pronouns. But in fact, like Fairburn's, Baxter's lover still wields a thoroughly pedagogical authority. For while that "you" no longer designates the reader, in the sense in which the "stranger" of "High Country Weather" does, it nonetheless advertises the poem's public orientation in the way in which it drifts free from personal specificity.

Rachel McAlpine, reviewing James Bertram's anthology of New Zealand love poems, refers to "private poetry in a public voice", a poetry whose tone and gestures are governed by continual deference to an "unseen congregation".[23] The poet,

Footnotes

21 Stead, "Towards Jerusalem", p. 8.

22 We also meet in early Baxter a "you" which designates a correspondent. However, in the interests of simplicity of organisation, I will defer discussion of Baxter's verse letter pronouns until I am ready to talk about the Jerusalem poetry.

23 Rachel McAlpine, "Both Worlds", *Islands* 19, p. 91.

then, retains a priest's authority, and his/her love-talk makes no effort to conceal the extent to which "you" is being processed and decorated -- less talked *to* than talked *about*. Consider, for example, the opening lines of Fairburn's "Epithalamium":

> We have found our peace, and move with a turning globe;
> the night is all about us, the lovers' robe.
>
> Mortal my love, my strength: your beauty their wound.
> Strip quickly my darling, your fingers be the wind
>
> undressing a snowy peak to the sun's love,
> scatter your clouds, be Everest, O my Eve.[24]

Despite the title's implications of a personal event preceding the poem and of a specific, exclusive addressee, we in fact see "you" relentlessly displaced -- a wound, a wind, a mountain (and Donne echo), a biblical figure -- less a partner in conversation than a clothes-horse on which the poet can hang a succession of bravura conceits. A poem like "The Cave" is less conceited, but no less Metaphysical. For although he writes more love poetry than anyone else of his generation, Fairburn is, as Baxter himself observes, "predominantly a poet of sexual idealism", whose "you" tends to be a "type figure".[25] This object pronoun, then, fails to dislodge the public as primary addressee; "you" figures merely as a blank cipher, reduced (to borrow another phrase from McAlpine) to "passivity and anonymous perfection" in a highly exclusive signifying game being played between the poet-as-priest and his "unseen

Footnotes

24 A.R.D. Fairburn, *Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Pegasus, 1967), p. 78.

25 "Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand", ed. Frank McKay, *James K. Baxter as Critic* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1978), p. 80.

congregation".[26]

Talking about Fairburn in these terms, Baxter might equally be describing the greater part of his own practice. Beginning with his earliest work, we can see that where "you" denotes a lover, the poem will nonetheless defer to the reader conspicuously, recording the love-life of a disembodied hieratic voice. Sometimes relationships are consummated metaphysically: "I cannot sleep / ... / Until you turn and compass me";[27] sometimes "you", elaborately supplanted by metaphor, becomes the object of a sexual idealism very reminiscent of Fairburn:

> Your mouth was the sun
> And green earth under
> The rose of your body flowering
> Asking and tender
> In the timelost season
> Of perpetual summer.[28]

And because that public orientation bespeaks an enduring obedience to that project of articulating collective truths, the poet of love resembles the poet of landscape in his tendency to express his insecurity in turgid rhetoric:

> Through the rock tunnel whined
> The wind, Time's hound in leash,
> And stirred the sand and murmured in your hair.
> The honey of your moving thighs
> Drew down the cirrus sky, your doves about the beach
> Shut out sea thunder with their wings and stilled the lonely air

Footnotes

26 McAlpine, "Both Worlds", p. 89.
27 "Lie deep, my love", C.P., p. 41.
28 "Let Time be still", C.P., p. 52.

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Footnotes

26 McAlpine, "Both Worlds", p. 89.
27 "Lie deep, my love", C.P., p. 41.
28 "Let Time be still", C.P., p. 52.

But O rising I heard the loud
Voice of the sea's women riding
All storm to come. No virgin mother bore
My heart wave eaten. From the womb of cloud
Falls now no dove, but combers grinding
Break sullen on the last inviolate shore.[29]

While the poem's "you" is buried under metaphors at once both trite and of doubtful coherence ("The honey of your moving thighs", "your doves about the beach"), we feel again a desperate straining at the collective in that habitual recourse to personification: the murmuring (not to mention whining) wind, "the lonely air", "the womb of cloud", the "sullen" combers, "the last inviolate shore".

No doubt one should be able to find more interesting (and more tolerant) approaches to this poem -- we could look, for example, at the luridly guilt-ridden way in which it goes about re-writing "The Cave". For the moment, however, I am interested only in the way in which it demonstrates the persistence of the same florid metaphoricity, and the same defensive inflation of tone, which colour the weakest of those early Baxter poems whose landscapes lack the presence of lovers. This tendency towards a frank abstraction persists more or less throughout Baxter's love poetry. One can compare, for example, two significant pieces from 1960, "She who is like the moon" and "On the Death of her Body". The latter, for all its manifest morbidity, is still only the flipside of its idealist companion piece, its range of available gestures being circumscribed by the same idealist dualism: the poem's aspirations are transcendental, the machinery of their ruin, biblical. Eight years later, "Grass and Night Wind" once again

Footnotes

29 "Tunnel Beach", C.P., p. 53.

puts "you" to the service of the mythological and the other-worldly, removed from time, particularity, and flesh. Four years on again and "He Waiata mo Te Kare" enlists that same pronoun in the shoring up of the architecture of Baxter's Jerusalem. At the end of this chapter I will pause to consider what I think is a love poem of a rather different kind. Meanwhile, however, it is time to start thinking about how Baxter might get out of this turgid soup.

ii) *The trick of walking naked*

Stephen Gould Axelrod, in his critical biography of Robert Lowell, credits William Carlos Williams with having "persuaded Lowell to trust in the authority of the self".[30] This statement is useful to the present discussion in that, while echoing that move seen in Baxter by Stead, it also points us to the source of that pressure which I believe alerts Baxter to the necessity for change. The extent to which Baxter is aware of his own predicament is difficult to judge. Stead sees it differently at different times: in 1973 he states that Baxter's descent from the stilts is "not a stylistic event, not the result of a decision to write differently"; in 1979, however, he allows the poet a theoretical perception of the need for change, albeit a "twilight" one.[31] In a sense perhaps it is unimportant, but I believe it may be worth trying to open the

Footnotes

30 Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 97.

31 See n.1, p.11; n.19, p. 19.

matter up for the light which it can shed on continuities between Baxter and his younger successors.

Literary histories are the progeny of literary historiographers, and the cohesive picture we now have of Baxter is largely, I think, the product of a community of concern among those who have historicised him. Manhire, whose famously tentative poetry is a constant refusal of the urge towards authoritative declamation, looks for Baxter to become less "editorial"; Stead, pushing his "red wheelbarrow" modernism, looks for Baxter to become more concrete; Wedde, with his aversion to evidence of strain, finds Baxter becoming more relaxed and comic, relinquishing that sense of will-to-language. Each of these related agendas serves to privilege the Baxter of Jerusalem in whom each critic can recognise a poet responding to his own concerns.[32]

Without suggesting that the later Baxter feels imperatives identical with those driving his juniors, I think we can observe, in the coherence of this critical fiction, that Baxter's is in part a response to the same theoretical barometer shift which makes itself felt in the altered face of the Seventies. Stead, Wedde and Manhire alike reflect the urgings of a line of poetics colossally bestridden by Williams and Pound. *Direct attention to the thing itself, go in fear of abstractions, no ideas but in things*: these and their associated slogans direct the poets of the *Freed* generation towards an art less spectacularly ambitious than Baxter's; the field of inquiry of this Seventies poetry, and particularly

Footnotes

32 One important critic who has more reservations about the Jerusalem work is Vincent O'Sullivan in *James K. Baxter* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1976).

early Seventies poetry,[33] is bordered, by and large, by what immediate experience permits the self to be confident of, while its nonchalant, intimate, personable tone bespeaks an enterprise which, while radically scaled down, remains at the same time quietly confident about the reliability of its information. As I shall try to make clear in due course, these poets of Wedde's and Manhire's generation make a far more refined job of this scaling down than Baxter ever does; reconstructed, however, in terms of that hieratic insecurity, Baxter's predicament becomes precisely that to which these modernist adjustments of the Seventies are a response.

Thus while it may well be that Baxter's perception of his plight is, as Stead suggests, largely intuitive, we can nonetheless recognise the belated and indirect impact of the influence of Pound and Williams. Baxter is frank about the extent to which he imitates other poets, and he acknowledges (in his introduction to his own work in the Doyle anothology of 1965) the impact at this stage of both Lowell and Durrell.[34] From them, presumably, he derives respectively the personability and the empiricism that his Seventies successors derive from Williams, Pound, the New York poets, and so forth. Thus, although one tends to think of Baxter as an anglophile and of American poetics as something that arrived with the *Freed* writers, in fact American poetics, and in particular the candour of late Williams, filter down also through Baxter by way of Lowell.

Continuing to stick with Stead's version of events, we can

Footnotes

33 Precisely what I mean by this distinction will, I hope, become more clear in Chapter 2.

34 Doyle, *Recent Poetry in New Zealand*, p. 29.

say at this stage that Lowell does for Baxter what Williams is reputed to have done for Lowell: he persuades him to trust in the authority of the self. The empirical solidity of an unembroidered "I" and its experience of its own immediate environment is entrusted with keeping the project grounded. The poem, that is, will generate its meanings not through lofty flights of rhetoric but by opening a window on the poet in his world, by "projecting the living body of the self".[35] The signifying self, then, absorbs that maligned rhetorical function: because the poet has learned to *trust* this self the coat of rhetoric can safely be stripped away. There disappears, then, that central insecurity which the poet used to strive so elaborately to paper over, and with it goes the need for that hieratic defensiveness and its attendant elevation of the poet at the expense of the audience. Confident in his new-found authority, Baxter can dispense with the old turgidities and project instead a candidly unadorned "I".

That all this is fraught with enormous difficulties will become apparent as soon as we start to anatomise the means by which this self is to be projected. Firstly, however, I would like to talk briefly about a phenomenon which I will refer to as *the embodied voice*. I offer this metaphor in preference to those terms -- "confessive", "confessional", "personalist" -- which are customarily invoked to describe a naked-looking self at a poem's centre. My objection to those terms is that they claim to account for a phenomenon that actually takes place *in the text*. By contrast, what I mean by the embodiment of voice,

Footnotes

35 Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos", p. 479.

while encouraged by specific textual strategies, can only take place in the mind of a willing reader.

As Wedde and Edmond have each observed, "voice" in the early Seventies functioned like a rallying cry:

> Fifteen years ago, when I was starting to write... the big thing was YOUR VOICE "FINDING YOUR VOICE" -- which I duly did.[36]

Presumably poets have always had voices, but with the arrival here of voice as it features in late Williams the range of possibilities inherent in it opens up radically.[37] The significance in this respect of the Williams of those sweet, chatty "variable foot" poems (though it has been present for much longer: see, for example, "This Is Just to Say") is in the extent to which he invites the reader to ground the text in moralised biography. Replete as it is with names and personal-looking memories, a poem like "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" seems intent on collapsing the "I" on the page (the subject of the enunciation) into that "I" that wrote the poem (the subject of the enunciating).[38] The moment the reader accepts this invitation, the voice becomes cloaked in biographical flesh;

Footnotes

36 Edmond, in Ricketts, *Talking About Ourselves*, pp. 168-169. I could just as well have quoted Wedde from the same source (Ricketts, p. 51).

37 Baxter, as we have seen, picks up the influence by way of Lowell. For the *Freed* writers the important influences here include Williams himself, Ginsberg, Berrigan, and O'Hara whose "Personism: A Manifesto" (*The selected poems of Frank O'Hara* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973], pp. xiii-xiv) has an interesting bearing on this discussion (see n.67, p. 105).

38 See in particular Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 205-216, pp. 223-230. For other pertinent references, see Toril Moi ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 124, n.5.

that is, voice is then *embodied*.

In attempting to isolate that system of strategies by means of which the poem extends this invitation, we will find ourselves talking frequently of that old chestnut, "realism". For what this voice solicits of its reader is precisely that suspension of disbelief for which realist writing has always appealed. As realism endeavours to efface its language, its fictiveness, the conditions of its production -- to produce, that is, the appearance of an unmediated opening onto reality -- so does that voice which would have itself embodied, contesting the emptiness of the pronoun that designates it, strive to efface its own fictitiousness. Opening a dissembling window on the poet who "can be seen to exist"[39] at its centre, this "realist" and "confessive" poem produces a body and asks that we use it to ground and authenticate the speaker's voice.

Despite all the manifest hazards which attend it,[40] this is an invitation which Baxter's critics have taken up enthusiastically; the late Baxter poem, so they inform us repeatedly, offers us a naked walking man. Stead may recognise the need for caution, as we can see in that equivocal "himself (or *a* self)" and in a comment from the earlier essay: "Baxter has managed ... to get something like the whole range of the personality into the poetry -- but (this being poetry) it is a

Footnotes

39 See n.19, p. 19.

40 Some of these hazards can be seen in operation in M.L. Rosenthal's 1959 review of Lowell's *Life Studies*, where the term "confessional" originates (*The Nation*, vol. 189, no. 8, pp. 154-155), as well as in Kendrick Smithyman's *A Way of Saying* (Auckland: Collins, 1965), pp. 165-213; Smithyman is my authority for the expression "personalist" (e.g. p. 207). Note, too, that Baxter himself supplies a precedent for reading pronouns transparently; see his comments on Lowell (n.34, p. 26) and on Robin Hyde (*James K. Baxter as Critic*, p. 88).

personality heightened and simplified".[41] It is a caution, however, which he exercises only sporadically. Here is a comment on *Pig Island Letters*: "But at the centre is the rough, grating, resonant voice of Jim the Catholic family man....".[42] In "From Wystan to Carlos" his use of the terms "persona" and "self" seems indiscriminate; moralism, in the mouth of this persona, becomes "a way of projecting the *living body of the self*".[43] For reasons to do with his own version of modernism, Stead feels compelled to try to ground Baxter's work somewhere on the far side of that "cheap fiction in verse":

> There is a more vivid sense of *reality*, a less structured approach to *experience*, a more free and flexible interaction between the language of the poem and *the world beyond*, and a richer sense of the *life and presence of the persona*....[44]

Persona it may be, rather than person, and yet this subject is persuaded to mark *presence*, not absence, and to open on to a world behind it which language does not fabricate but simply *interacts* with.

Reality, experience, world beyond, life, presence: this roll-call of privileged terminology makes apparent just how readily a Curnowesque realism embodies the voice. Like Stead, Peter Simpson is a critic well schooled in Curnow's localist imperatives:

Footnotes

41 Stead, "Towards Jerusalem", pp. 14-15.
42 Stead, "Towards Jerusalem", p. 10.
43 See n.35, p. 27, my italics.
44 Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos". p. 479.

> In Jerusalem ... all the strands of his life came together.... His life took on the shapeliness of a poem, and his poetry flourished as never before, issuing in a style which transparently displayed the texture of his life.[45]

Murray Edmond who, initially at least, is similarly at home in Curnow's discourse of the local,[46] anticipates this response term for term in that early essay which I mentioned in my introduction:

> The mask of style -- the accepted notion of what poetry is -- has been dropped to reveal the man himself, guileless....
>
> ....
>
> Jerusalem was an attempt, concrete, realised, continuous, real, not art, to make a poem which would speak to men. In this context the Jerusalem writings and publications exist only as adjuncts to the reality.[47]

What is this Jerusalem which Edmond is talking about? How can he, as one who "knows" "Jerusalem" only through Baxter's poetry and through word of mouth, distinguish between a fictional Jerusalem and a Jerusalem which is "real, not art"? To say that Baxter's life took on the shapeliness of a poem is useful, but we need to be careful to emphasise that "life" here must mean language, as in *James K. Baxter: A Life.*

Because of the familiarity of that realist invitation, because of the wide-reaching impact of Baxter, and because of the predominance of intimate-looking pronoun structures in the

Footnotes

45 "A Poet's Life; a Life's Poems", *Span* 12, p.28.

46 See, for example, the localism of "The Grafton Notebook", or later a poem like "Stopping the Heart" ("We share the gap between the vision of what was meant / to be and this reality" [*End Wall*, p. 30]).

47 Edmond, "The Idea of the Poet", p. 36.

work of so many poets writing in the Seventies, this willingness to read body into voice quickly seems to have become standard practice. And, as critical habits will, it appears often to be invisible to those critics practicing it.[48] What has been conspicuously lacking, however, or at least until the possibility was opened up implicitly by the fractious mutterings of the *And* fraternity in the mid-1980s, and what of course necessarily *must* have been lacking for these assumptions of transparency ever to have become as entrenched as they have, has been any acknowledgement of the extent to which this ostensible exposure of personality might be (in Kendrick Smithyman's phrase) "instrumental",[49] that the emperor might be fully clothed, that this celebrated trappingless self might in fact be a product, a fiction, an Abominable Walkingman.

In a sense, however, it is not hard to see why. Watching Stead, the poet-critic, pushing that "Wystan to Carlos" poetics whereby "open" means in effect "open the window", it is easy to understand his reluctance to address that otherwise urgent possibility that this central subject might be less the *agent* of any change than its *product*. Baxter, we said, gets down off his stilts by learning to walk naked. But this just provokes a further question: that is, how have our critics been persuaded to jettison their formalist caution and report back these sightings of an unclothed "Baxter"? How does he *perform* it, this trick of walking naked? The answer I wish to offer is that this ostensible nakedness is in fact the product of specific changes that take place in Baxter's work as a result

Footnotes

48 For two (1985) comments on the prevalence of the habit, see Wedde (Ricketts, p. 51) and Roger Horrocks ("'"Natural" as only you can be', *And* 4, p. 115).

49 Smithyman, *A Way of Saying*, p. 170.

of his (perhaps intuitive) perception of that bifurcate hieratic insecurity. A particular arrangement of "I" and "you" helps orchestrate a general scaling down -- of subject matter, register, prosodic effects, volume -- while the need to drop epistemological anchor produces more emphasis on the concrete image. These strategies which Baxter adopts to relieve his work of abstraction and sententiousness promote a subject pronoun which might *appear* transparent: in other words, Baxter walks naked by scaling down from his stilts.

At which point, for Stead and that "red wheelbarrow" modernism, the argument's circularity becomes alarming. For if that nakedness, rather than being an immanent agent, is simply a contrived effect, then its claim to being able to alleviate that insecurity collapses. The focal self is then just one more fiction, one more expression of that epistemologically partial authority of the geography master. That self can anchor an epistemology only if it entertains a stable, essential relation to the pronoun which designates it and to all those other metaphorical effects that, accumulating in its name, *name* it. In other words, Stead's realist Baxter writes in a manner no less abstract than the Baxter of any other phase; promoting that "trappingless" self, he has merely shored up that abstraction with an essentialism. If we turn now to the *Jerusalem Sonnets* it will quickly become apparent that their Hemi persona is as much the product of an arbitrary authority as any other of Baxter's fictions. And thereafter, when we shift our attention from the subject pronoun to the object pronoun, "you", we will find that authority being dispensed from as schoolmasterly an elevation as ever.

iii) *The slave of God*

> *This happy creature -- It is he that invented the Gods.*
> *It is he that put into their mouths the only words*
> *they have ever spoken!*
>
> Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

Early in that article from which I quoted earlier, Manhire discusses the late poem "Haere Ra". Picking up on that stilts metaphor, he describes it as "a scaling down which is a wonderful scaling up"; then he offers what, in light of his own practice, is a somewhat mystifying statement:

> Even the similes on which the poem rides are ordinary, not deployed on behalf of extravagant discoveries or effects. True, they are part of a process of revelation -- for the poem is a quiet coming-to-terms with the resonances of its title -- but they are there because they have come into view, objects from the poem's real landscape. [....] Certainly the poem shares a curious effect with a number of the Jerusalem writings -- as if it has been translated from another language and might stand free of the niceties of language altogether.[50]

Baxter has somehow produced images of such purity that the agency of language and of a consciousness ordering it has been erased completely from the poem's surface. He himself describes this imagistic mode as one of "many stones but not much mortar", where the stone is the concrete sensory image, and the mortar that subsidiary language required to bind the stones together.[51] Mortar language is redolent of the stilts, of the privileged sensibility lecturing, explicating, inventing. By contrast, this new mode wishes merely to

Footnotes

50 Manhire, "Events & Editorials", pp. 104-105.

51 W.H. Oliver, *James K. Baxter: A Portrait* (Wellington: Port Nicholson Press, 1983), p. 97.

register things as they occur; having transcended Stead's "cheap fiction in verse", Baxter simply cashes in "the poem's real landscape":

> The bees that have been hiving above the church porch
> Are some of them killed by the rain --
>
> I see their dark bodies on the step
> As I go in -- but later on I hear
>
> Plenty of them singing with what seems a virile joy
> In the apple tree whose reddish blossoms fall
>
> At the centre of the paddock.... (2)[52]

This second of the *Jerusalem Sonnets* may subsequently become more discursive, but no moral lesson is ever extracted from these bees; they are simply offered for the reader's contemplation, as if whatever this scene might signify were immanent in the scene itself, pure phenomenal incidence cast in a language whose simplicity strives to efface the hand that wrote it.

That realist distinction between stones and mortar voices an ambition dear to the heart of modernist poetics. We feel it in the rhetoric of Pound and Williams ("no ideas but in things" etc) and it shimmers (and constantly recedes) before Stevens:

> Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
> Burn everything not part of it to ash.
>
> Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
> Without evasion by a single metaphor.
> Look at it in its essential barrenness
> And say this, this is the centre that I seek.[53]

Footnotes

52 C.P., p. 455. Throughout the rest of this chapter, numbers which appear in brackets refer to the numbering of the *Jerualem Sonnets*.

53 Wallace Stevens, "Credences of Summer", *Selected Poems*,

Realist essentialism aspires, as Barthes puts it, "to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves", where meaning is "a natural quality of things, situated outside a semiological system".[54] To posit that distinction between stones and mortar is to evoke once more the dream of what Barthes calls an "anti-language" -- meta-language, as distinct from mortar language -- that is, a semiological system contracted into an essential one.[55] Two important features of this contraction should be noted. Firstly, as Nietzsche and Derrida would want to remind us, it is possible only by virtue of the erection of a Transcendental Signified, a metaphysical absolute which, having once apportioned names to things, will stand as guarantor of their relationship in essence. Secondly, such a contraction is crucial to the projection of a stable, non-fictional subject.

Taking up firstly the second of these issues, we can observe that Baxter's "stone" writing, striving to erase its debt to language, tends to foreground a poet-like personality -- or at least to encourage the reader to do so. Stead, in praising the direct and concrete nature of a passage from "East Coast Journey", sounds very much like Manhire as he appears above:

> The skill ... is in how little is needed to call up a whole scene ... so particular you feel it as something experienced. You cannot "see" ["a log riding"] without seeing more than is literally in the words of the poem.[56]

Footnotes

(London: Faber, 1965), p. 93.

54 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 133.

55 Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 133; see also p. 134.

The poem, for Stead, is a window on the real, not a construct but simply an event. Accordingly, the personality recording it, which is one of those additional things we "see" if we care to look through the poem's window, is similarly immanent, similarly whole and transparent. A poetry which privileges stones over mortar, privileges likewise self over language by disguising the extent to which that self is *constructed* of language -- as if indeed it might "stand free" of those "niceties". A voice which announces "But O rising I heard the loud / Voice of the sea's women riding / All storm to come", is prosecuting such a conspicuous invention that we are not tempted to treat the voice itself as anything other than a fictive construct; by contrast, a voice which says simply "later on I hear / Plenty of them singing" is more likely to induce us to "see" it in a body.

Further, this "transparent" effect, engendered by the scaling down of metaphor, is enforced by a general scaling down of subject matter. To help bridge that hierarchical gulf dividing the geography master from his students, the later Baxter tends to shorten his focal length and concentrate on the domestic and the mundane -- eating, dressing, gardening, the weather, trying to give up cigarettes -- rather than on those portentous, eschatological staples by reference to which poetry, and none more than Baxter's, has usually been accustomed to authenticate itself. For this trivial information to assume any interest, we need to infer the presence of a stable subject around which a narrative can

Footnotes

56 Stead, "Towards Jerusalem", p. 12.

coalesce. As we join the dots of these quotidian activities, we come to believe we can recognise this figure. Domestication of subject matter, then, nurtures that appearance of a body around the voice.

At this stage, however, it is time to demur and ask how, precisely, this realistic detail actually finds its way on to the page. Can we simply assume that these events took place in some "real life" and are found here recorded in the only words which could possibly describe them? How do we come by those hiving bees: that is, are they real or fictive? Having already cased the former option, let us now consider the latter. Does the fact that the poet found fit to "record" them, and that their presence (or better, absence) resonates on the page, have anything to do, I wonder, with their ability to evoke literary ancestors buzzing around in Virgil, in Marvell, and most importantly, perhaps, in Baxter's own "Wild Bees"? More to the point, would they have been enshrined in verse had they not chosen to hive above the *church* porch, to die on the *church* step, and to sing in an apple tree beneath which Baxter places a "springcart" then transmuted into "Elijah's chariot"? Of course there may have been some specific bees which a poet once found hiving above a real church porch at Jerusalem. But is it not possible that they might have been hiving somewhere else, and that Baxter *chose* to locate them there? Or if the church had been home, not to bees, but (say) to wasps, would they too have appeared in a poem, or might they have found themselves turned into bees anyway? Finally these endless possibilities are irrelevant because any reality here is textual: what we "see" is not a "real landscape" but a landscape mythicised, a

paysage moralisé.

As a symbolic landscape it reflects, of course, the subjective imperatives of the person assembling it. Not that we need to go quarrying for these, for it wears their imprint frankly. By evoking any piece of Jerusalem's "factual" life, Baxter seems able to touch an ideological base: to venture into this "natural" world is to venture into a world already known. Consider, that is, its isolation, its Maori community, its Catholic community, its chapel, its pastoral economy, its taniwha-housing river -- and consider the relation of this symbolic geography to that series of moral binarisms with which these poems are underpinned, the more specific ones (Maori v. Pakeha, Catholic v. Calvinist, Jerusalem v. Auckland/ Wellington, the junkies v. the fuzz) and the more general humanist myths that are their parents (Nature v. Culture, the Spirit v. the Material, etc). It is as if an enormous judgemental magnet has somehow been passed over the landscape, leaving its every feature morally cathected.

Once that landscape has been organised by the impression of this symbolic template, Baxter can write with seeming spontaneity and yet always be confident of bringing to light an abstract coherence:

> Dark night -- or rather, only the stars
> Somebody called "those watchfires in the sky" --
>
> Too cold for me the thoughts of God -- I crossed
> The paddock on another errand,
>
> And the cows were slow to move outside the gate
> Where they sleep at night -- nevertheless I came

As it were by accident into the church
And knelt again in front of the tabernacle,

His fortress -- man, His thoughts are not cold! (10)

The meandering, equivocal syntax of that "nevetheless I came / As it were by accident" betrays the dissembling quality of the statement: that arrival at the church can never be an accident once that church has first been apportioned its crucial status in the local symbolic topography. Similarly, that "call of nature" is anything but a call of *nature* -- rather, it is an act of textual obedience to an intricate layering of the sacred and the profane which is forever thrusting defecation into conjunction with the contemplation of the deity.[57] Whatever shape nature assumes in these poems is dictated by the imposition of a design which accredits a select range of its features with figurative values. "The high green hill I call Mount Calvary" (4) did not achieve this identity naturally.

The question of design and template now urges a return to that business of a Transcendental Signified: it is time, that is, to be more specific about the shape of that design and its origins. "[B]ecoming, as it were, / Available is all my science..." (22): let me offer these lines, out of context, as a declaration of technical intent. They claim to introduce, that is, not another fiction, but simply an immanent self "made available"; promoted to the centre of Baxter's work, this self is reported to have scaled that work down, though this report will stand up only for as long as we are happy to be blinded by Baxter's science. If, on the other hand, I replace that quote in context, it may at first appear that I have been doing it a

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57 See, for example, Sonnets 5, 22, 30.

certain violence:

> Let the Maker of rainbows and mountains do what He wishes
> With this poor idiot, this crab in His beard
>
> Who will not be dislodged -- becoming, as it were,
> Available is all my science,
>
> And what He will do He will do -- the problem is
> Not our existence, Colin, but our arrogance
>
> That wants to run the party.... (22)

These lines refer, it will be objected, not to availability to an audience, but simply to availability to God. In fact, though, this availability of persona to Maker describes precisely that science -- or, better, that metaphysics -- by means of which Baxter wants to contract the fictive into the absolute.

Such a contraction is possible, that is, only by means of a scrupulous evasion of the poet's own agency as a builder in language:

> Colin, you can tell my words are crippled now;
> The bright coat of art He has taken away from me
>
> And like the snail I crushed at the church door
> My song is my stupidity;
>
> The words of a homely man I cannot speak,
> Home and bed He has taken away from me;
>
> Like an old horse turned to grass I lift my head
> Biting at the blossoms of the thorn tree;
>
> Prayer of priest or nun I cannot use,
> The songs of His house He has taken away from me;
>
> As blind men meet and touch each other's faces
> So he is kind to my infirmity;
>
> As the cross is lifted and the day goes dark
> Rule over myself He has taken away from me. (37)

Just as divine authority can be invoked to over-rule objections that might otherwise be thought relevant to inter-personal matters -- "Home and bed *He* has taken away from me": who, precisely, is making the decisions here?[58] -- so does the erection of that higher power furnish a paternity for an immanent self. "The bright coat of art" is of course Yeats's "coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies", which the poet has now discarded in order to walk naked. But leave the poet himself to discard it and that "I" remains suspiciously fictive; for the self and the world on to which it opens to escape the subjective insecurities of fiction, it must be presented as the expression of a superior agency, of that organising metaphysical first principle. If the self is merely a subjective invention then its utterance is no more epistemologically secure than is that disembodied voice which howls and glooms in the abstract wilderness of Baxter's earlier work. An immanent self becomes available only when the role of the poet in the textual fabrication of that self is obscured; Baxter effects this evasive action by laying responsibility for that fabrication at the feet of that metaphysical absolute in which the poem comes ultimately to rest: "The bright coat of art *He has taken away from me*"; "Rule over myself *He has taken away from me*".

Baxter signs his last sonnet "Hemi te tutua": Jim the nobody, Jim the slave.[59] Stripped, we are told, of all will-

Footnotes

58 A similar evasiveness seems to trouble "He Waiata mo Te Kare", the long poem "to Baxter's wife" (see Weir's translation, C.P., p. 631) which opens *Autumn Testament*.

59 See Weir's translation, C.P., p. 634.

to-language, no longer capable of naming himself, Hemi is simply the slave of God. This is the climax towards which that attempt to efface the writing's artifice has always been steering, an act of epistemological masochism[60] which will rescue the self from the wilderness of its own fictiveness. These being Holy Sonnets, the gesture is anticipated by Donne and his fervid pleas to Three-Person'd God that He should batter, scourge and ravish him. The metaphysics are identical: like Donne, Baxter needs to posit a Divine Author who will stabilise his tropology; metaphor is then incarnated, not as figuration but merely as the reading of an analogous universe, the divine will written in *Nature's mystik Book*.[61] When Baxter's persona whips himself with his belt buckle, we can see him trying to subject himself to God, to erase the workings of his own authority by offering himself as object to the divine subject.

But of course the authority behind which the speaker hopes to conceal his own textuality is itself a textual invention, and the Hemi who means to be the slave of God remains in fact the slave of the poet and -- to that illimitable extent to which the poet's language must always exceed him, say less, more, other than he intends -- the slave of language itself. This is not to say, however, that that fictive construct "God" and His associated mythical apparatus do not have a major part

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60 cf. Sartre: "...masochism is a perpetual effort to *annihilate* the subject's subjectivity by causing it to be assimilated by the Other". Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 379.

61 The last phrase is borrowed from Andrew Marvell, urbane and vigilant epistemological ironist. See "Upon Appleton House", *Complete Poetry* (London: Dent, 1984), p. 82.

to play in the shaping of this central persona. In fact, so crucial is a Christian metaphoricity to the specific contours that this Hemi takes on that it becomes hard to imagine what kind of central self it could be that we hear Stead talking about. I suspect that the particular contraction he describes is more evident in his own sonnets, and again in the earlier work of Edmond and Wedde. There the self, in its embrace of another, is treated as the incontestable incidence of the real. The self in the *Jerusalem Sonnets*, by contrast, is built from an over-arching theology. Baxter is not prepared to allow his project to rest in an undecorated realism: a vestigial high romanticism seems to demand that more up-market materials be used in the construction and authentication of the fictive "I".

To be sure that we distinguish this enunciated subject from the person who actually wrote the poems, let us continue to refer to "him" as Hemi. Like any self, Hemi is a site where codes converge and engender identifications. In this respect, Christian mythology is potentially an extremely powerful force. In buying into God as his stabilising principle, Baxter in effect buys up a kitset out of which to assemble his protagonist: every time he reaches for a metaphor to further elaborate Hemi's contours, that Christian template is on hand to help and thus have its say in the shape he assumes. Returning, for example, to Sonnet 37 (quoted in full on p. 42), we can tabulate an extensive array of metaphors constructive of Hemi: he is crippled, artless, songless and prayerless, he is divorced from home and family, he is blind and infirm. All these figures have biblical antecedents. In a more elaborate vein, devotion to God supplies that powerful masochistic

metaphor: Hemi as the snail crushed beneath the heel of God prefigures Hemi stripped of rule over self, prostrate before the lifted cross, while Hemi as the old horse "Biting at the blossoms of the thorn tree" (the tree being the cross, and the blossoms Christ's wounds) enacts an exotically decorative and ambivalent identification with his saviour's passion. There are other codes at play here, of course; we have already noted Yeats's contribution, for example. The point, though, remains straightforward enough: the metaphoric colours in which Hemi is decked out -- the materials, that is, out of which he is *created* -- are determined in a crucial way by that ornate biblical scaffolding on which the sequence is hung.

Perhaps Baxter's favourite likeness for Hemi is that somewhat *risqué* likeness to Christ himself. In Sonnet 11, for example, "One writes telling me I am her guiding light / And my poems are her bible", and a magpie/Satan then takes Hemi/Jesus up to a high place and offers him the kingdoms of the earth: "Pakeha! You can be / The country's leading poet". In Sonnet 9 he is the crabs' "sad host"; in Sonnet 6 he observes "to be is to die / The death of others", not a responsibility that most of us think to take on ourselves; in Sonnet 34 he announces "Tribe of the wind, / You can have my flesh for kai, my blood to drink"; and so forth. My interest here is not in matters of decorum; what concerns me about these metaphors is simply the clarity with which they demonstrate the role played in the construction of this reportedly naked "Baxter"-figure by this elaborately metaphorical template.

In a sense, of course, Baxter's styling of himself as Jim the nobody displays all the semiological savvy we could ask

for: incorporeal, purely figurative, Hemi appears as our Abominable No-man wryly supplying himself with an identity in the very act of disclaiming one. If, on the other hand, we fail to detect that wryness, the gesture becomes merely disingenuous; obviously Hemi is naming himself continually -- that is, Hemi is being named continually by that unstable alliance of language and language-user. One could go on indefinitely listing the names that Hemi is given to call himself -- beginning, for example, by adding to our collection the following: "a madman, a nobody, a raconteur" (1); "a leather-jacketed madman set on fire by the wind" (2); "this old bullock" (19); "this poor donkey" (21); "a blind man walking" (21); "this pakeha fog-eater" (34). "Self-effacing" is how one might be tempted to describe these metaphors, but of course they are just the opposite: they serve, that is, not to efface a self but to invent one.

The exercise gets highly repetitious. More useful, perhaps, would be to consider certain naming strategies whose more oblique manner might go further towards explaining how Hemi's blatant fictiveness has managed to escape comment. To begin with, it is interesting how often Baxter arranges for Hemi to be named in the third person: by God ("you old crab farmer" [14]); by Satan masked as a magpie ("You can be / The country's leading poet" [11]); by the kids in Auckland ("Jesus", "Moses") and Jerusalem ("Mr Baxter") (24); by "the noonday demon" ("a bloke of your talents" [28]); and so forth. Sometimes this delegation of authority demands extraordinary contortions:

> if you are consulted
> One day, Colin, about my epitaph,
>
> I suggest these words -- "He was too much troubled
> By his own absurdity" -- though I'd prefer "Hemi".... (29)

This positioning of Hemi as predicate of another subject's enunciation extends that fiction of slavery and passivity. Like the appointment of God as author, this placing of names in the mouths of others disguises the governing role of the poet in the invention of Hemi's identity.

Inside the poem, this fictive identity is not built solely by word of mouth -- be that Hemi's mouth, or another's. He also emerges progressively as the landscape with which he is identified emerges -- his setting, that is, is an integral part of the character we imagine for him. More interestingly, perhaps, he also takes on shape from the community with which Baxter surrounds him. This community has all the appearance of a random real-life event; in fact, though, it is a meticulously laminated textual artifice, organised around Hemi and the act of giving gifts. Colin Durning aside, the first appearance of other people is in Sonnet 7 ("Jill and Maori Johnny") and Sonnet 8 ("My thirteen-year-old son Hoani"): in these instances the gifts are words rather than objects; the former teach Hemi to swear again; the latter teaches him a Buddhist aphorism. When other people appear thereafter, they bring, almost without exception, material gifts: tobacco from "the guests" (15); sunflower seeds from Michael Illingworth (18); a ring from Alan Thornton (20); "Bread and cake and potted eel" from Agnes (21); "my pants and shirt / From Father Te Awhitu; my boots from the Vincent de Paul / Society" (23); cabbage plants from Sister

Aquinas (29) and dwarf beans from the same "person" (33). The repetitiousness of this (not exhaustive) catalogue serves only to underline just how carefully orchestrated this community is.

In part this gift structure is designed to set up a pay-off: the poems themselves are "my gift to you, Colin" (39). More than this, though, this cast of benefactors helps to shore up Hemi's tangibility: he is the one thing all these characters have in common, and each new identification enforces our sense of his reality -- which is another way of saying that each gift is the same gift, a gift of position, of identity. Again, note how this gesture echoes the desire to enter an object relation to God: as gift-receiver to gift-giver Hemi becomes a passive object posited in every act of receiving. Invented thus by a force outside himself, the persona is confirmed in his role of slave. But of course the meticulous way in which this charity is orchestrated should remind us that the givers are themselves, like Hemi, slaves of a subjective, manipulative, authorial consciousness. It should also alert us to the apostolic and Franciscan antecedents of this fiction of holy poverty.

Nothing about these poems, then, is as "open" (in Stead's sense) as appearances may at first suggest; on closer inspection we find the author everywhere doing his best to impart to his text a shape which is both subjective and epistemologically tenuous -- its hold on the "true", that is, is more secure (than that of Baxter's early work) only if we are happy to accept the mythic architecture which frames it. The text remains "open", but only in as much as language must always elude authorial intention; everywhere he can, that

author enforces a closure.

Much has been made by these poems' apologists of their willingness "to embrace and mirror contradictions", to pursue "conflict and contradiction rather than settled doctrine";[62] the writing, it seems, is exploratory and tough-minded, willing to keep its lines of inquiry "open". But Jerusalem's fictive architecture apportions moral good and evil so conclusively that it is hard to know just what is left at issue, just as it is hard to applaud Hemi's doctrinal equivocations when their effect, inevitably, is simply to congratulate him on his alertness and exemplary humility.[63] When Hemi is named in the third person, he has a habit of declining any name which is laudatory (e.g. 11); it is curious, however, how an after-image always lingers. Reflecting on his time "On the streets of Grafton, where I was king / For a little while...." (7), Hemi, in the same gesture, seems both to abdicate and to arrogate, conjuring no-one so vividly as Lear, determined still to wield the authority he has relinquished. Authority here is given away only in that sense in which it is given away to God: God is instated simply as a puppet; the poet may pretend to hand over authority, but of course he is still the one pulling the strings. Continuing to prosecute a stable truth, Baxter retains a subjective authority quite as contestable as that of the editorialising stilt-walker.

So far in this discussion we have touched on three partial explanations for the strength of the imputed biographical presence in these poems. A realist deployment of concrete

Footnotes

62 Manhire, "Events & Editorials", p. 109; Stead, "Towards Jerusalem", p. 16.

63 See, for example, 11, 13, and in a more secular (and contentious) vein, 32.

images, especially when these images accumulate in protracted sequences, tends to "open on to" a recording consciousness; this effect is enhanced, I suggested, by a domestication of subject matter necessitating a subject-centred narrative for its coherence, as well as by indirect naming devices utilising what looks like a pre-existent, "real" community.

In as much as it can be separated from these effects, a Wedde-style "atrophy of the sense of will-to-language" serves to buttress and consolidate them. It is generally accepted[64] that we can observe in late Baxter a general downward modulation of register, and a tendency to avoid conspicuous prosodic effects; rhyme and metre become elusive and irregular, and the punctuation becomes less formal. The bearing of this atrophy on the speaker's claim to walking nakedness should be readily apparent. Firstly, a vernacularisation of diction, especially in tandem with a domestication of subject-matter, can be seen to help alleviate that hierarchical alienation of poet from reader; the speaker appears more *personable* -- "a man speaking to men", perhaps, rather than the voice of a disembodied authority. Secondly, that scaling down of prosody, disguising as it does the extent to which the speaker's utterance has been contrived for effect, is integral to realism's attempt to pass its constructs off as natural. As was noted earlier, if language can efface its stage-management at the hands of the author, then it will also deter us from recognising that the speaker's identity is being stage-managed in the same act.

It requires, however, only the most casual scrutiny of the

Footnotes

64 For example, by Manhire ("Events & Editorials", pp. 110-111) and Wedde (*Penguin* introduction, pp. 43-44).

formal habits of the *Jerusalem Sonnets* to establish that prosodically these poems are far less casual, exploratory and matter-of-fact than they may appear. After all, is it more significant that Baxter takes liberties with the sonnet form, or that he chooses to impose this formal template in the first place? And what are we to make of that claim to artlessness voiced in Sonnet 37 (see p. 42) when in fact each second line shares the same rhyme, very much after the manner of certain of those "songs of His house" which the speaker has supposedly had taken away from him? Once again we need the Lear metaphor: these poems cling stubbornly to that formal authority which they make the pretense of having given away, and of course this seriously compromises their alleged openness. Stead enunciates with admirable concision the equation between open prosody and open thinking -- "only the statement being made will justify the words chosen"[65] -- and suggests that the first sonnet leaves us with a question:

> "Do You or don't You expect me to put up with lice?"
> His silent laugh still shakes the hills at dawn.

But if we are looking for an exploratory attitude encapsulated in a form casual enough not to prejudice it, then that last line must create some problems: listen, that is, to the steady pentameter, the lilting rhyme (still / hills), the accumulation of sibilants, that catalogue of pregnantly suggestive romantic totems: silent, hills, dawn. How far have we really come from "Of what's eternal shake his grave of time"?[66] To my ear it

Footnotes

65 Stead, "Towards Jerusalem", p. 14.
66 "Poem in the Matukituki Valley", C.P., p. 87.

all sounds so finished and sonorous; that dying fall seems to obliterate the question which precedes it.

This retention of hieratic poise, this tendency to invoke a stilt-walking belletristic authority, is entirely consistent, it will be noted, with the persistence in the *Jerusalem Sonnets* of that old anxiety as to how these poems' truths can be anchored. Because of their inescapable metaphoricity, expressed in that debt to a fictive Christian mythology, these poems remain fundamentally abstract. Moreover, those formal considerations alert us to the fact that the manner of their broadcast retains that former editorialising sententiousness. To test the truth of this last assertion, we now need to shift our attention from the speaking subject to his addressee.

iv) *"My gift to you, Colin"*

Jerusalem Sonnets, poems for Colin Durning: so reads the full title of the first (1970) edition of these poems;[67] as such, they represent the consummation of Baxter's long romance with the verse letter. The significance of this genre, in the context of that flight from an editorialising insecurity, is spelled out suggestively by Manhire:

> Some of the best early poems are written as letters: the presence of a single figure as object of address preserves them from an excess of public declamation. It is hard, that is, to write editorials to friends.[68]

Footnotes

67 C.P., p. 638.
68 Manhire, "Events & Editorials", p. 112.

To elaborate, the presence of this "single figure" seems to be important in two respects. Firstly, it will help restrain prosody and register, and the metaphorical gestures they serve, within the confines of the demotic and the personable. In other words, the difficulty of writing editorials to friends safeguards those effects responsible for the persona's tangibility. The letter's pretence of being uncontrived, of serving simply to put the self on record as a substitute for the correspondents' "seeing" one another, allows the voice to disguise the fact that it is fabricating the poem's self as it proceeds. Secondly, if the poet does break bounds and revert to his old editorial manner, the fact that the voice can still be seen to move from "I" to "you" *inside* the poem helps to disguise the fact of *our* being lectured at. Moralism, as Stead puts it, simply "becomes an aspect of character",[69] and our notion of what is "concrete" expands accordingly: the body around the voice is seen to soak up that discursiveness, enclosing the poem in inverted commas and thus rendering any speech a *thing* in its own right.

Like so much of Manhire and Stead on Baxter, initially this seems to make perfect sense; tested against the poems themselves, however, it begins once again to seem more applicable to happenings in Edmond, Wedde and (in this case) Manhire himself than to anything that really takes place in Baxter. The reader will recall that in my opening discussion of pronoun formations I broke the field down much as Manhire does, bracketing off that "you" of the verse letters from the

Footnotes

69 Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos", p. 479.

"you" of Baxter's love poems; in the latter, it was asserted, we could still hear the geography master lecturing (to mix those two metaphors) Rachel McAlpine's "unseen congregation". What I now wish to investigate, then, is whether or not that bracketing-off is really justified: does that single object of address preserve Baxter's verse-letter poems from sententiousness?

Among the earliest and best-known of those letter poems are the two addressed to a certain "Noel Ginn".[70] The following stanza is from the second of these:

> I have the letters that you wrote from camp
> (Defaulters' camp, in case this should be read
> By other men) where living men grew dead
> In grey monotony. I was a lamp,
> A kind of beacon to you then, you said --
> Since then the wick has grown a trifle damp.[71]

The parenthesised "footnote" tells us two things. Firstly, in fleshing out the addressee (i.e. telling us that Noel Ginn was imprisoned as a conscientious objector) it frames the poem with a moral context designed to inform our reading of the whole piece. Additionally, it reminds us of where the poem is truly facing: it is intended, that is, for an unseen congregation which, in order to understand it, requires that any private references be de-coded. This in turn explains why the poem's tone is no less declamatory than that of the work which surrounds it; Ginn is but a nominal presence in that sense,

Footnotes

70 Again, Baxter's model for his early verse letters is probably to be found in Auden (and again perhaps by way of Curnow who wrote at least one Audenesque verse letter, "Spring, 1942" [*Collected Poems*, pp. 129-131]).

71 C.P., p. 71.

simply standing in for the public at large; the pronoun which designates him appears twice only, in the first and fourth of the poem's fifteen stanzas.[72]

If it is possible, then, for this addressee to collapse into the public at large, Baxter also writes a kind of letter poem in which the addressee collapses into the speaker himself:

For Kevin Ireland

Friend, if you have strength to praise
The lion-headed incubus
That grips your life and mine within
Its strict Egyptian maze,
Expect no lessening of pain
Easy bed among the lies
And coffeehouse adulteries,
Only that your words will live.

Cut with ink of vitriol
These words upon a living brow --
I am by force of blood and star
One of the maimed immortals who
Tread a pathway to the fire
Where affliction makes them whole.[73]

The reason for Ireland's appointment as addressee is evident in that phrase "your life and mine". Ireland, figured as a "maimed immortal", allows the speaker to hold forth on his own poetic vocation. The italicised conclusion resembles that Jerusalem epitaph (see p. 47), the addressee being furnished with lines which he then delivers on the speaker's own behalf. This employment of "you" as a cipher for the speaker finds its comic epitome in the first "Letter to Peter Olds": "Have a wank *for me*, on the grass by the varsity....".[74]

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72 He also appears twice in the earlier version, in stanzas one and ten of sixteen. Here his presence seems even more nominal as he is not supplied with any distinguishing characteristics (C.P., pp. 27-29).

73 C.P., p. 186.

74 C.P., p. 581, my italics.

The people addressed in Baxter's verse letters usually fall into one of these two categories; some, like Maurice Shadbolt (*Pig Island Letters*), share features of both. What is more rare is an object of address whose importance derives from his or her own specificity -- an addressee, in other words, who resists that collapse into "I" or into "you-the-public". I am referring, for instance, to the effect we can feel in Ursula Bethell's letter poems; there a (fictively) stable addressee is important on account of where she lives, her specific identity thus lending the poems a here/there structure crucial to their exploration of the exigencies of colonialism. The only examples that spring to mind in Baxter are the various poems addressed to the speaker's parents:

> You, tickling trout once in a water-race;
> You, playing cards, not caring if you lost;
> You, shooting hares high on the mountain face;
> You, showing me the ferns that grow from frost;
> You, quoting Burns and Byron while I listened;
> You, breaking quartz until the mica glistened.[75]

Such particularity attaching to the object pronoun is conspicuously absent from the *Jerusalem Sonnets*. Who, we might ask, *is* Colin Durning, and why has Baxter chosen to address him? Actually, we find out nothing about Durning until the final sonnet, wherein it is implied that he lives in or near Dunedin and shares with Hemi a circle of acquaintance. Take out that sonnet, and one other apparently private reference ("you know, Colin, / What I mean when I say 'Te Kare'" [19]) which in any case will be explained in *Autumn Testament*, and there is nothing here which would make diminished sense if

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75 C.P., p. 66.

"you" were understood as denoting the reader. Accordingly, the fact that he is frequently addressed by name becomes no more than a decorative effect; just as often he is addressed as "man", which serves to generalise his presence even further.[76]

Not surprisingly, then, we find that the nomination of this addressee fails to exercise any marked restraint on the poetry's hieratics. We have already taken note, for instance, of that formal authority to which the sequence clings. Similarly, these poems make frequent forays into mortar language and editorial declamation:

> the problem is
> Not our existence, Colin, but our arrogance.... (22)

> I am only half sane
> But the sane half tells me that newspapers were made
>
> For wiping arses and covering tables,
> Not for reading -- now, man, I have a table cloth. (16)

The general reader is not protected from the weight of this bombastic manner by an internal presence as flimsy as Colin's.

Nor, clearly, is it intended that s/he should be. We don't find out who Colin is simply because we never need to: like Noel Ginn he figures merely as a cipher for that unseen congregation which constitutes these poems' assumed audience. Hemi, in fact, is very emphatic about the broad social ramifications of his project:

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76 cf. Manhire, "Events & Editorials", p. 114.

They say it is best

To break a rotten egg in the creek
To get eels -- I think I am that egg

And Te Ariki must crack me open
If the fish are to be drawn in at all. (35)

To misappropriate a handy metaphor, Hemi is the centering scent;[77] the luring out of that constituency will found a counter-cultural utopia, emanating from Hemi, the messianic centre, as the latter-day Christian tribe emanates from Christ. This cracking open of Hemi by God prefigures those metaphors of masochistic artlessness which follow in the next sonnet but one; it is a metaphor for the broadcast of a message, and the offering up of that artless self as an exemplary antidote for social ills is an emphatically "public-spirited" gesture. No wonder, then, that Colin is eclipsed, and that these poems still seem to speak from a great height.

It is also interesting to note that Colin at times collapses into another kind of object:

Colin, you can tell my words are crippled now;
The bright coat of art He has taken away from me.... (37)

The entire poem is in fact a prayer, and Colin himself has no place in it; its real addressee is that "He" before whom Hemi is prostrating himself and whose attention he wishes to call to his own humility. Again, though, we should not be surprised, for the idea of a stable object has always been something of a straw person. It is, after all, only a realist superstition

Footnotes

77 From Murray Edmond's "A Sprig of Karo", *Patchwork* (Eastbourne: Hawk Press, 1978), unpaged.

that encourages us to look for a pronoun to close on a single signified. Set Leigh Davis loose on this text and he would tell us, I suspect, that "He" itself is a potently over-determined signifier, opening on to Mother (who will punish and love, and reabsorb the speaker into an amniotic wholeness) as surely as Noel Ginn (the conscientious objector) opens on to the figure of Father. As anyone familiar with his work will realise, Baxter is particularly susceptible to the kind of reading which would identify in, say, "a forty-year-old baby / Crying out for a lost nurse / Who never cared much"[78] the after-image of an oedipal rupture that sets his whole gargantuan romanticism in motion.

v) *The "third-person you"; the "first-person you"*

Before I move on and leave Baxter behind, I would like to double back and pay a fleeting visit to that interesting phase of his work which coincides (to judge from the J.E. Weir *Collected Poems*) with the period spent in Dunedin as Burns Fellow between 1966 and 1968. It is a period which Baxter's commentators and anthologists have tended to overlook somewhat in their haste to reach that supposedly more substantial achievement of the Jerusalem poetry.[79] However, we have heard

Footnotes

78 "Words to Lay a Strong Ghost", C.P., p. 363.

79 Again O'Sullivan seems to be the exception. For example, where Wedde and McQueen include nothing from between *Pig Island Letters* and *Jerusalem Sonnets* (except for "Ballad of the Stonegut Sugar Works", used less as an example of Baxter than as an example of the satirical ballad ["Introduction", p. 48]), O'Sullivan finds room for both "Summer 1967" and "At the Fox

Murray Edmond record that "those are still the poems of his I go back to most" (see p. 2), and because this is an opinion I sympathise with I am hopeful that some attention to this work may help to qualify a construction of Baxter which to this point feels somewhat unnecessarily mean-spirited. I want to look, then, at two poems from this period which happen to be quite untypical of Baxter's corpus as a whole, but which now sound, at least to this reader's ear, less dated than the greater part of his work. The reason for this, I wish to suggest, lies in their deployment of two distinctive pronoun formations which resemble more closely than anything else in Baxter the structures which will govern and distinguish the work of his younger successors in the Seventies.

We can observe the first of these at work in a poem from 1968:

The Garland

At times you are not present.
There are other times
(It could be walking up a path, on loose gravel, between
lilac bushes,
Or driving a car late at night when the headlamps all of a
sudden pick out the masts of a boat
From a river bank) - it may happen without premeditation
You inhabit my wrists, my arms and my shoulders,
As if you were a child, or a part of my own flesh,
The heaviest part.
It has very little to do with
The way you comb your hair, the words you might speak;
Perhaps it is not you. You only bring it about
As the wind makes pods of gorse shift on black creek water;
But the difficult moment is when I lie down beside my wife,
switching off
The electric blanket, and between her body and mine

Footnotes

Glacier Hotel" in *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, second edition 1976).

> Your body is interposed. An invisible hernia. For this you
> can hardly be blamed,
> Who simply put your arms round my neck
> With a gesture of giving. But the garland is heavy. It makes
> my feet
> Sink into concrete pavements as if into the new soil of a
> grave.[80]

Here we can see a temptingly embodied-sounding voice addressing what I will refer to as a *"third-person you"*. I invoke this somewhat nonsensical neologism in order to try to isolate the difference between the object pronoun of this poem and the object pronoun in the *Jerusalem Sonnets*; the latter, we saw, can collapse into you-the-reader (the "second-person you") without appreciably wounding the poem's coherence, whereas for "The Garland" to make any sense whatsoever, its "you" must designate a third person *inside the poem*. The images out of which the poem is constructed (the events described in parentheses, for example, or the suburban mundanity of "switching off / The electric blanket") are emphatically trivial except in as much as they are animated by a dramatic narrative, a kind of conjugal mathematics ("between her body and mine / Your body is interposed") whose coherence depends on the integrity of that object pronoun. In voicing that suspiciously civic-sounding "integrity", I may appear to be turning my back on that salutary notion of the over-determined pronoun raised at the end of the preceding section. In fact, this pronoun *will* be over-determined, as sexual relationships inevitably are; the "integrity" of that "you", however, derives from the poem's being arranged in such a way that, while we can never know to whom precisely it refers, it can neither circle

Footnotes

80 C.P., p. 417.

back and subsume the reader, nor subsume the speaker (as in "For Kevin Ireland").

The voice, then, which addresses itself to such a pronoun, declines to acknowledge a wider audience; the reader is admitted only as a voyeur, the poem thereby cultivating the appearance of having originated *in private*. It is not simply a matter of where the poem is addressed, however, for we need to remain aware of that tactical system -- the wariness of abstractions, the low-key prosody, the domesticated ambience and exaggeratedly unportentous detail -- with which the poet is striving to conceal his own agency and impart to his poem the illusion of transparence. We are talking here, in other words, about a realist scaling down which has now been buttressed with a more stable object-pronoun, a "you" which looks like a "real person". Accordingly, this "third-person you" is to be distinguished, not only from that verse-letter pronoun, but also from that "you" which we have already looked at in Fairburn and in Baxter's earlier love poems -- a pronoun which, while it cannot be said to *designate* the reader, nonetheless acknowledges an unseen congregation in the conspicuous way in which it finds itself displaced and processed as if for consumption elsewhere.

Of course the "you" that inhabits "The Garland" continues to be manipulated, processed, used, and must still be built out of figurative identifications. There is, however, a sense in which a burden of signification that must otherwise fall to metaphor is shouldered here by that dramatic narrative structure, and in which the metaphorical constructions which do persist ("As the wind makes pods of gorse shift on black

creek water"; "An invisible hernia") attempt to explain the way "you" impacts on "I" -- thus tacitly conceding their own fictiveness -- rather than to idealise or mythologise. The metaphorical significance which "you" has imputed to it explicitly advertises its dependence on the author of that imputation ("Perhaps it is not you. You only bring it about....") and the circumstances under which he is performing it. Accordingly, the poem's metaphoricity does not obstruct that process whereby the strategies of realism, aligned to a particularised pronoun, contrive to present the appearance of a window opening onto a real-life sexual drama.

I have no wish to promote a set of value terms which would make "The Garland" a "better" poem than the most widely admired of the Jerusalem work. I am concerned only with the sense in which it feels more *recent* -- more like something that (to stretch the point a little) an early Wedde or Edmond could have written -- and with the relationship between this Seventies feel and the role that the poem assigns to a pronoun whose dramatic integrity guarantees an effect whereby that poem appears to originate *in private*.

The use of that pronoun has in fact become so pervasive that it may be hard to imagine that it has not been with us always. But if we turn, for example, to Wedde and McQueen's *Penguin*, we will find it only in Margaret Orbell's translations from the Maori; in the tradition in which the poets under discussion here are working, it is on display, prior to the close of the 1960s, nowhere but in a handful of poems by Alistair Campbell, many of them included in his stage play, *When the Bough Breaks*.[81] As my use of drama as metaphor may

have indicated, the stage setting makes explicit the scenario which the "third-person you" is calculated to evoke: one character addresses another, a single speech act lifted from a spectacle extending implicitly before and after it; as "audience" we are obliged to attend, not just to the meanings of words, but also to nuances of tone and gesture and to the shapes in which bodies arrange themselves, a complex informational package from which we derive an ever-evolving appreciation of the various characters and their inter-relationship.

Elsewhere, the lover as object of address seems inevitably to be excluded by that hieratic traffic between the poet and a primarily public audience. Eileen Duggan frequently addresses a lover in the second person (especially in her 1937 *Poems*), but her procedures closely resemble Fairburn's in that they are invariably Metaphysical rather than dramatic. Typically, a Duggan "you" will surface only at a poem's climax, pulling into focus a metaphor which has been accumulating independently of it; "you", then, is less a character than a cipher in a wordy algebra of conceit.[82] Bethell and Brasch both play to the gallery in a slightly different manner to Duggan. In Bethell's memorial poems, and in a considerable part of Brasch's work, it is made quite clear that "you" does not designate the reader. However, neither will surrender that mandarin elevation, and neither appears at all inclined to introduce us to whomever s/he *is* addressing. Consequently, Bethell appears more candid

Footnotes

81 Relevant titles include "Blue Rain", "Why Don't You Talk to Me?", "Purple Chaos", "A Poem About Nothing" (*Collected Poems* [Martinborough: Alister Taylor, 1981]).

82 For example, see "When in Still Air", "Cloudy Bay"; *Poems* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937), pp. 36, 51.

in her letter poems, though in fact that candour is radically selective as can be seen whenever a *person* (as opposed to a plant, pet, or change in the weather) wanders in view of her proverbial camera.[83] For Brasch's part, it is only in isolated late examples that he approaches the intimacy he seems to aspire to;[84] elsewhere, as Peter Simpson has pointed out, the tone in which his "I" addresses his "you" sounds suspiciously like that of his *Landfall* editorials.[85]

As I said in my introduction, unhappily a lack of space dictates that these jottings must substitute for a more adequate survey of those public gestures in which that "you" has been enlisted, and for some finer distinctions which might yet be drawn. I can only invite the reader to complete the job for me, and suggest that a useful point of departure would be Ruth Gilbert's "Green Hammock, White Magnolia Tree":

> They cannot speak who have no words to say.
> If, in my songs, I have not sung of you
> It is because I could not find a way.[86]

The reason, I would suggest, that that way could not be found -- by Gilbert, Bethell, Duggan, Fairburn, Glover, Brasch, or even by the poets of the Fifties -- is that it remained locked in the secret fastness of America. It is tempting to conjecture, then, that one explanation of the difference between Mary Stanley's *Starveling Year* and the Campbell of "Why

Footnotes

83 For example, see "Grace", "Fortune"; *Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Caxton, 1950), pp. 18, 35.

84 For example, see "Signals", *Collected Poems* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 137-138.

85 Peter Simpson, "All in the Family: Continuum of Discourse in Recent New Zealand Criticism", *Ariel* vol. 16, no. 4, p. 11.

86 *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1985), p. 238.

Don't You Talk to Me?" is that the latter had by this stage read that candid late Williams (see e.g. my p. 28).[87] It is, however, the poets of the Baby Boom who will be responsible at last for the bulk importation and acclimatisation of this intimate, dramatic pronoun structure, and I wish to suggest that, as much as anything, it is the prevalence of this "third-person you" which makes that poetry which erupts with, say, the Baysting anthology, distinctive and instantly recognisable.

Meanwhile, in a second Baxter poem from this same Dunedin period, we can observe the workings of the other crucial Seventies pronoun formation, that which Wedde in particular will turn to when his earlier certitudes begin to desert him. Again, however, an appreciation of this structure's significance will require that it be placed in an historical context. Once more, then, let us back-track a little.

Introducing his *Collected Poems* (1974), Curnow describes a turning point in the 1940s whereafter his attention will shift "away from questions which present themselves as public and answerable, towards the questions which are always private and unanswerable".[88] As his subsequent poetry becomes more knotty and problematic, he tends increasingly to abandon his geography master "I" for a "you" which Wedde, who likes to cite Curnow as his authority in this, describes as "an impersonal way of

Footnotes

87 Baxter remarks that Campbell shows "the influence of American models" (*James K. Baxter as Critic*, p. 84), and there are circumstantial clues in Campbell's poetry that point to an early awareness of Williams: the shape of "Images", the curious last line of "Bitter Harvest" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 16, 32). Alternatively, Campbell may have picked up that tone by way of various of Williams's descendants gathered in Donald Hall's influential anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

88 Author's Note, *Collected Poems*, p. xiii.

talking about yourself",[89] and which I will refer to henceforth as the *"first-person you"*:

> To introduce the landscape to the language
> Here on the spot, say that it can't be done
> By kindness or mirrors or by talking slang
> With a coast accent. Sputter your pieces one
>
> By one like wet matches you scrape and drop:
> No self-staled poet can hold a candle to
> The light he stares by. Life is the wrong shop
> For pictures, you say, having all points and no view.[90]

As an impersonal way of talking about *yourself*, it signals in Curnow that turning away from matters public and soluble to matters introspective; as an *impersonal* way of talking about yourself, it represents in Wedde a retreat from an earlier posture which foregrounds a self with far more confidence. From this it may be inferred that it is a highly flexible pronoun. For Curnow, it restricts the scope of his broadcast as he tries to shed the mantle of nationalist cultural legislator. For Wedde, that "you" can be a way of broadening that scope. He refers to it in *Georgicon* as "'I' / drawn into the collective / the multitude who are / also listening".[91] Here, then, it seems to universalise that "I", and thus to downplay that valorisation of the exemplary individual which will come to cause the Seventies poets so much unease; by the same token, though, it is Wedde's choice of pronoun when his utterance is at its most anguished and private. The "first-person you", then, offers insurance on two fronts: if you are

Footnotes

89 Interviewed by David Dowling, *Landfall* 154, pp. 170-171.
90 "To Introduce the Landscape", *Collected Poems*, p. 189.
91 "winnow", *Georgicon* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1984), p. 20.

lecturing the public then you are lecturing yourself at the same time, thus offsetting that schoolmasterly stiltedness; on the other hand, if you are talking about yourself then you appear less messianic for being "drawn into the collective".

Against this background, then, let us look finally at a Baxter poem from 1967:

The Sailor

North of the headland, holding the tiller,
You were aware of islands. Islands
Entering the eye as a burglar enters a room.

The terrible drunkard's longing took hold of you,
To swallow earth, to wrap oneself in leaves,
To stay if necessary ten years on one of those
Bush-covered lozenges of rock,
Beaten by spray, hauling up food in a bucket:

A desire to become luminous
Like stars looked at over hills in the rain.

Later, much later, a glow like fire on the clouds,
It was Auckland breathing in her sleep,
City of wounds, city of friends,
Where one must lift and carry the great boulders.

The dead have now become a part of us,
Speaking between our words, possessing all our dreams.
To be a sailor is to die of thirst.[92]

If this hardly sounds like Baxter at all, then one explanation is that, at least according to my reading, this is the one place in his entire corpus where this pronoun appears. Employing it, we find Baxter striking an unusually reserved and tentative note, pushing his own narrative away from himself. Like "The Garland", it is a poem of ungratified desire, and more than anything else I can think of in Baxter it anatomises and distances itself from its own mechanisms for constructing

Footnotes

92 C.P., p. 406.

the world. The act of erecting an imaginary coherence is treated for once as contestable, a temptation, a "terrible drunkard's longing", and it calls up images ("Bush-covered lozenges of rock", "hauling up food in a bucket") which are uncharacteristically wry and self-deprecating, as if the act of performing such identifications deserved to be treated with irony.

Moreover, this poem seems to recognise, as I have argued that the Jerusalem poems fail to do, that once that imaginary identification has been posited (the speaker's idea of himself achieving that solitary, monastic purity, his "desire to become luminous") its after-image persists even when it is repudiated: to be a sailor is to die of thirst, to suffer that "terrible drunkard's longing", because in fact that identification *has* been made. The speaker, like Hemi, does still mythologise himself in somewhat grandiose terms (i.e. as Sisyphus), but note that extent to which even this gesture deflates itself through the use of the impersonal pronoun "one" (a more formal version of that "you"). Note also the lyrical, balanced economy of "City of wounds, city of friends", which makes for an interesting comparison with the rhetorical bluster which Auckland excites in Baxter on other occasions.[93] It does not appear to me to be coincidental that Baxter should experiment with this particular pronoun in a poem where he seems more willing than usual to recognise the problematic nature of his own constructions. We will find as we move on through the Seventies that it is the pronoun that poets tend to reach for when asking themselves the most difficult questions.

Footnotes

93 For example, "Ode to Auckland", C.P., pp 597-600.

CHAPTER 2

"THE SEVENTIES"

i) *The embrace of "I" and "you"*

Murray Edmond's debut volume, *Entering the Eye* (1973), opens with the following inherently paradoxical gesture:

Private Words
for Mary

1
At the divide of land & sea
words fall endlessly.
Places renamed overgrown below
ambient nothing above.
Incarnate: two spiders
at the hub of the web;
a cat in the sun
a slash of light on the floor;
my hand pressing your buttock
there.
Geographic symbiosis.
The indelible place.[1]

Eight years later his third volume, *End Wall*, concludes

Tonight I embrace you and trust the roof will hold up
till morning.[2]

In the pages that follow I wish to suggest that the arrangement of pronouns which governs these two constructions might also govern a distinctive and chartable era in New Zealand poetics, an era whose parameters happen to coincide with that phase of Edmond's career which I have just fenced off. I do not mean to ascribe to Edmond responsibility either for ushering in or for ushering out this pronominal epoch.

Footnotes

1 Murray Edmond, *Entering the Eye* (Dunedin: Caveman Press, 1973), p. 6.
2 Murray Edmond, *End Wall* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 47.

However, from this span which I have just sketched we may infer that Edmond spends his first three volumes progressively refining one specific pronoun formation -- a formation by attention to which I hope we may arrive at at least a tentative understanding of what it is that gives the poetry of the early Seventies its unmistakeable flavour.

It is not, though, a flavour which is produced for very long. Edmond, by the conclusion of *End Wall*, has reached the same crisis-point which Wedde arrives at after the completion of his own third volume;[3] it is the point at which the certitudes of the Sixties (which the traditional New Zealand time-lapse translates into the certitudes of the early Seventies) collapse and ring down the curtain on a poetics of self-sufficiency which imbues this poetry of the early Seventies with its sense of self-assurance and intimacy. In those savagely angst-ridden "first-person you" poems from *Castaly* (published 1980; subtitled *"poems 1973-77"*), Wedde puts an erstwhile self-possession through the mincer and initiates that second phase of his career wherein he will find it almost impossible to get outside his own equivocations and ironies; Edmond charts the impact of the same anxieties in his purposively dour and public fourth book, *Letters and Paragraphs* (1986), and from this vantage-point it seems extremely unlikely that either will again write as sweetly or as confidently as he did in those heady days of fifteen years ago.

I want, then, to look at the early phases of these two

Footnotes

3 Or second and third, since the successive publication of *Earthly* and *Spells For Coming Out* does not reflect the chronology of their composition (see Michele Leggott, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde 1967-78* [unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1978], p. 103).

careers and to try to justify my assertion about the crucial role played there by that embrace of "I" and "you", that contradictory act of making "private" words public. I hope to demonstrate precisely why that pronoun structure served these poets so well while it did; additionally, though, I think it will become apparent just why eventually they were forced to repudiate it. Later, when I turn my attention to Manhire, I will try to use this pronominal trajectory to tease out a continuity (between his own work and that of Edmond and Wedde) which I think is not otherwise readily apparent.

I suggested earlier that the Seventies project can be seen to be animated by similar anxieties to those which we have ascribed to Baxter. Having had drummed into them by Pound and Williams that they must (in Pound's phrase) "go in fear of abstractions", the Seventies poets show a common concern with staying as close as possible to the concrete. If I may reiterate an important point, then, the first thing to note about the embrace of "I" and "you" is that "you" most emphatically does not embrace the reader. Projected towards a stable "third-person you", all speech is dramatised to the extent that even abstract rhetorical talk assumes a kind of concreteness; the speech act slips into speech marks which designate its specific use, its status as language in action, as discourse, as *thing*. A book like *Earthly* is awash with abstractions, but these are dramatised and anchored by the tangible domestic context in which they are uttered. Moreover, through being excluded by that "you", the reader is exempted from having to play object to the speaker's subject, from being lectured at.

This is basic to an understanding how it is that the work of these younger poets sounds so much less orotund, so much more urbane than Baxter's. Though both of the ideas I have just outlined are raised as possibilities by Baxter's verse-letter structure, the fact that Baxter's "you" tends to collapse into the reader, and that moral lessons continue to be served up directly to that reader, means that Baxter never really stops lecturing.

The "you" in Wedde and Edmond is insured against such a collapse by that kind of particularity which we observed in Baxter's "The Garland", a mathematical congruency which insists (as best it possibly can) upon the stability and specificity of the addressee. The "Mary" to whom "Private Words" is dedicated is invoked by name in each of Edmond's first three books, and because from time to time Edmond will take pains to alert us to the fact that "you" designates someone else in a particular instance -- a poem will carry a specific dedication,[4] or else the pronouns will be expressly rearranged so that the lover is displaced from the second person by a child: "she was thinking of you / her child and me too her / husband"[5] -- he appears to be extending to us an invitation to equate "you" and "Mary" unless advised otherwise. A character called "Rose" performs a similar, if less insisted-upon, function for Wedde. In *Earthly*, as we have seen happen to Edmond's partner-figure, she is displaced from the second person by a child; in the *Sans Souci* sequence, which makes up the first third of *Spells*, she is displaced by a figure who seems to be the speaker's former

Footnotes

4 For example, "A House by the Sea" (*End Wall*, p.23), "An Afternoon in the Garden" (*Patchwork*, unpaged).

5 "The Purse, The Curse", *End Wall*, p. 33.

lover. These last are poems which place extreme emphasis on the dramatic intricacy of these pronouns, which is a point I raise here, not out of a desire to construct by implication some salacious narrative involving poets and their "real lives", but merely to emphasise the trouble that this writing takes to push apart you-the-object and we-the-audience. There will be times when these poets, and similarly Manhire, will throw up smokescreens of pronominal ambiguity, but this is a gesture which relies for its effect on that normative prising apart and the (thereafter manipulable) expectations which that habit engenders.

Admitting the reader, then, only as a spectator, these poems depend on an act of unveiling, an opening up of the private to the voyeuristic attentions of an audience. Implicit in the pronoun structure itself, it is also a gesture which we frequently hear these poets talking about. As we shall see, it troubles Wedde deeply in *Sans Souci*, while Edmond, who launches his public career by broadcasting words which are explicitly designated "private", has a fondness for metaphors which recapitulate this figurative removal of a wall -- the "End Wall", perhaps, which is the work of a painter (Philip Trusttum) who has taken his canvas and "cut a hole, an eye, a window / in the wall for looking out and looking in", an action the speaker himself then mimics: "I smash a post in half and in its rotted core a weta lies, soft and sleepy, / hiding until its new exoskeleton hardens....".[6]

Time and again Edmond reproduces this movement, taking out that shielding wall and inviting his reader to observe his

Footnotes

6 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 42, 47.

speaker in intimate relation to a third. Here is a short poem from *Entering the Eye*:

The Rub

for years I have
taken an edge under my thumb & rubbed
it smooth & smoothed it till it
rubbed and that was you
& who were you who also
were those bright late mornings laughing
at me at yourself at the sunstroke on the
stonecrushers & on the clay
what is habit & what is not
by which we come to saying goodbye
& a friend leaves decorously
to leave us together
she stands outside
on the old lower path
looking out across the gully
to the piled ridge where the motorway is
& behind her drops the hole
where 62 stood before it burnt down
& behind that long creepers of blue
convovulus fall thickly over gums
oak and mahoe
then the nursery Domain hospital the sky
wet humid blue
here & there about us there is habit & not habit
& between our eyes there is such a cluster
even when we pull tightly together

such & not such
here & not here
I stroke your hair
my fingers go round an edge[7]

I quote this in full so that we can observe its logistics; it appears, that is, to be a drama involving three persons, but note how carefully Edmond stage-manages the additional participation of the reader-as-voyeur. While the speaker and his lover are "saying goodbye", the third player, their friend, discreetly turns her attention elsewhere. Initially the reader's attention follows, but in the last six lines, while

Footnotes

7 *Entering the Eye*, p. 27.

the friend continues to take in the view, the reader is invited back to watch the speaker and his lover embrace and to overhear his "private" words to her.

This candour, warmth and intimacy are attainments which distinguish these "young New Zealand poets" forcibly and refreshingly from their local predecessors. Accordingly, we can see this pronoun structure, with its capacity to preside over such intimate revelations, as a lever with which the Seventies poets work themselves free both of Curnow's poetics and of the poetics of the "School of Johnson". There is, in fact, between the *Freed* poets and Curnow, a more substantial continuity than is sometimes acknowledged. For though the younger poets discovered and learned from a previously foreign set of models, there inheres in that tradition of American modernism a commitment to the local, deriving most crucially from Williams, that inevitably carries its New Zealand adherents deep into the heart of Curnow Country, just as Pound's insistence on "hardness" can sit comfortably alongside (or even "behind") Curnow's dedication to the "real".[8] It is after all Brunton, *not* Curnow, who describes "a response that divorces us from objects" as the "provincial error", while elsewhere Brunton recalls a desire to be "bigger [than "Curnow etc"] but, paradoxically, more local even".[9] However, if to this point we find the ambitions of the Seventies' poets anticipated by Curnow, their commitment to the personal is in a different category.

In the last fifteen years or so the strategies of the

Footnotes

8 cf. Roger Horrocks, "No Theory Permitted On These Premises", *And* 2, p. 133.

9 Alan Brunton, editorial, *Freed* 1, and letter to Peter Simpson (1984).

personalised love lyric have become so familiar that it is easy to forget that things were not always as we find them now. Here, for example, is Roger Horrocks:

> There is a shortage of human love poems in [Curnow's] *Penguin Book*, as I discovered one morning in 1962 when I found a copy beside someone's bed and went from cover to cover looking unsuccessfully for a suitable poem -- something tender, sexy, a little crazy. One or two poems almost qualified but what I needed was Arthur Baysting's anthology (not published until 1973).[10]

As Horrocks then goes on to point out, anything suggestive of sex in Curnow's anthology will almost inevitably be addressed to the landscape: the result is that austerity which his anecdote laments. For early Curnow, forging a space to write in demands the assertion of the reality of *here*, a localism dramatising the struggle of the colony with the colonial parent. For those younger poets, this oedipal contest presents itself rather differently, as we may infer from Lawrence Jones's description of Wedde as a "spokesman for a generation formed not by Depression and war but by the intense private struggles of personal relations out there on the counter-culture fringes of our affluent urban society".[11] At issue now is not so much the centrality of the local as what Manhire calls, wryly, "The importance of personal relationships".[12] Whatever else one might care to say about Allen Curnow's formidable oeuvre, one would never be tempted to

Footnotes

10 Roger Horrocks, "The Invention of New Zealand", *And* 1, p. 24.

11 Lawrence Jones, "*Spells for Coming Out*" by Ian Wedde", *Pilgrims* 5/6, p. 135.

12 The title of a poem in *How to take off your clothes at the picnic*, (Wellington: Wai-te-ata Press, 1977), p. 36.

call it "tender" or "sexy". It is hardly surprising, then, that where Curnow uses a "second-person you" which later gives way to a "you" which appears auto-referential, the Seventies poets, in an effort to get beyond that somewhat impersonal severity, channel their efforts into the one version of that pronoun which Curnow shows no interest in.

The poets of the Fifties, of course, had themselves vowed to populate the landscape -- there is, for example, Smithyman's famous quip about getting the lovers off the gaunt hills and into the bedrooms,[13] and the rhetoric of Johnson and Bland for whom "the more personal and intimate issues" had been occluded by (in particular, Curnow's) "narrow and restrictive formalism".[14] But by comparison with the populous intimacy of Seventies poetry, the Doyle anthology, *Recent Poetry in New Zealand*, which as a polemical reply to Curnow's 1960 *Penguin* might have been expected to show-case such intimacy as had been excluded by Curnow's allegedly dogmatic focus on geography, is striking today less for its personalism than for its somewhat Groupish aridity. The prevailing notion of "population" is clearly social rather than personal. Commuters and wage-slaves are more in evidence than lovers, and poet-figures identify themselves by their privileged insight and alienation from a prevailing grey materialism, rather than through their identification with an intimate Other.[15] Fifties poems have people in them, but by and large they are people viewed from the elevated platform of the isolated social commentator.

Footnotes

13 Smithyman, *A Way of Saying*, p.48.

14 The first phrase is Louis Johnson's, the second Peter Bland's, *Recent Poetry in New Zealand*, pp. 102, 46.

15 See, for example, Bland's "The Nightwatchman" (*Recent Poetry in New Zealand*, p. 54), or Johnson's "From Exile" (below).

The poets of the Seventies are just as judgemental and just as capable of moralism; in the Seventies, however, a notion of community is always backing up along a second axis to sweeten and compensate for this, so that the anti-community of the suburbs or the corridors of power will be rebuked, not from Bland's lonely watchtower, but from the plural fastness of an alternative which that poetics of the Woodstock era fancies itself as inhabiting. So while the Fifties poets are inclined to fall back on the privileged sensibility besieged on all sides by philistinism, the tactical foundation of the social criticism of the Seventies is a pronoun structure which gives the appearance of opening onto a speaker *connected to other people*. Consider, for example, the distance that separates the Johnson of "From Exile" and the Wedde of "Those Others":

> What I have chosen is not easy --
> to live in this land of the barbarians
> and their strange worship, working
> among them in my own way at things
> they would seldom understand or honour.
> And yet the solitude of it is solid gold
> sometimes....
>
> (Johnson)[16]

> O my dear friends I reach out
> as though across the sea
> to embrace you....
>
> (Wedde)[17]

For Wedde this connection is nothing if not tenuous. More often than not his protagonist is left struggling towards it, trapped in his lonely "Danse Russe"[18] while community goes on

Footnotes

16 Louis Johnson, *Bread and a Pension* (Christchurch: Pegasus, 1964), p. 46.

17 Ian Wedde, *Spells For Coming Out* (Auckland: Auckland/Oxford, 1977), p. 43.

without him somewhere else, or mooning in the solipsistic privacy of his attic which he will escape only by falling into the family breakfast. The desire, however, of "I" to embrace "you", generates in the Seventies an idea of "population" which bears little resemblence to that which governs the Doyle anthology.

For all that, the attitudes of these poets towards such acts of disclosure can be more equivocal than I have so far admitted. Not only can this embrace be difficult to consummate in the first place, for reasons which we will go into in due course, but there are also certain risks inherent in its public dramatisation. Edmond's "Notes on the Bedroom" is a neat encapsulation of his recurrent and paradoxical gesture of disclosure:

> 3 Most private of rooms. This is almost an invocation as in - "Most private of rooms, show me your secrets". To obtain privacy its exact position becomes critical. As in the Zen question - "Did I place the tree outside the window or the window under the tree?"[19]

Privacy is the essence of the bedroom -- which in the moment of so saying is thrown open to the public. A razor's edge of decorum is being trodden here, as the terms of the speaker's sudden indentification with the physicist Slotin seem to imply:

Footnotes

[18] cf. Leggott, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde*, p. 139; the phrase is William Carlos Willams's.

[19] Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 40.

> 5 Suddenly I am in the room with Slotin - "twisting the dragon's tail" - as he put it. The room is a laboratory. Note the publicness of this room. Slotin is giving a demonstration. No demonstrations in bedrooms. Along the bar of the abacus Slotin slides the two hemispheres of uranium. He is searching for the critical position. And his hand slips.[20]

Nine days later, Edmond then informs us, Slotin will be dead of radiation sickness. Is this a cautionary tale, then, to remind us that we break that prohibition against public demonstrations in bedrooms at our gravest peril?

Similarly, Wedde in *Sans Souci* appears extremely ambivalent about the prospect of impending disclosures. Here is the first piece from that sequence:

The Programme

> I invite you to an opening.
> Who knows what could happen?
> All you need is
> faith, bread, & your due portion of hate.
> What about later for that/
> love is what is going to be revealed
> if only we can get together some good teams.
> O throats like massed trombones, knuckles like admired
> flights of steps to the cathedrals of Europe,
> skulls resonant as the blasting lids
> in your bird sanctuary,
> eyes which have become accustomed
> to their skilfully lacerated blinkers, etc.
> When the protocols
> have been established & the stakes laid
> & the people seated & the media got
> to quick vantage points, then we whip
> the covers off her, okay? &
> they settle *her* record once & for all.[21]

"You" here appears to designate the reader, invited to an opening which, while redolent perhaps of the world of the

Footnotes

20 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 40.
21 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 9.

visual arts, also carries with it a surgical metaphor. As Michele Leggott has pointed out, wounds and scars tend to be regenerative for Wedde,[22] and so the idea of a wound that needs opening and cleaning would appear to be in keeping with a notion of healthy-minded candour; elsewhere in the sequence, after all, "openness" is treated as a salutary condition:

> Men & women step
> into each other fling open the shutters &
> air their place.
> Thus it all comes round
> again, light green & love....[23]

Yet for all that it seems a deeply ambiguous invitation, which wants to pair the speaker and the reader in a prurient and predatory bond ("& the stakes laid / & the people seated & the media got / to quick vantage points"), and which excites a series of violent and even sadistic images: "we *whip* / the covers off her, okay?", and note also the various images related to the eyes (an organ highly privileged in Wedde's verse), for an explication of which I refer the reader once more to Leggott.[24] An ambivalence is apparent also in a series of sardonic remarks ("Who knows what could happen?"; "What about later for that/") whose archness seems to take back with one hand the invitation which is extended by the other.

This retraction of that invitation recurs at the climax of "Losing the Straight Way", where in response to an elliptically sketched disaster ("the bed full of / blood, the second heart

Footnotes

22 Leggott, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde*, p. 98 ff.
23 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 12; cf. Leggott, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde*, p. 99.
24 Leggott, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde*, p. 99 ff.

silent, / the wave suspended, the / wave falling, the moment before / we cry out, our fires / licking into each other"[25]) the speaker abandons the first person and forsakes that metaphor of opening for one of closing, of covering up:

> Their mouths crept together for comfort.
>
> Their lips crept together for silence.
>
> The mouths of their wounds
> crept together for concealment.
>
> Beneath white lips of scars
> their blood ran on in silence.[26]

Given that earlier emphasis on opening, and the stress that this particular poem places on a triangular relationship between "I", "you", and "she", this defensive pronominal realignment becomes a significant event in the sequence's novelistic unfolding. The media have been dismissed, and it would be, to say the least, indelicate to insist on our right to more photographs.

If this last remark seems somewhat fatuous, I insert it nonetheless to try to broaden our discussion of the risks involved here. There are dangers, that is, for the critic as surely as for the subject on the page and for the poet himself. This arrangement of pronouns seems to draw us irresistibly into that murky twilight of the confessive, and clearly there is a strong temptation to stop talking about pronouns and start talking about people. For example, Michele Leggott, to whom I am both manifestly and deeply indebted, makes this substitution frequently.[27] Leggott is Wedde's ideal reader, his best-

Footnotes

25 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 25.
26 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 15.

informed and his best-intentioned critic; accordingly, though -- that is, given that she appears to have access to further biographical information -- she often seems to me to be writing from a perspective which commands a view beyond the poem and back into the private history of the person who wrote it.

If there is a sense in which, as Wedde's authorised critic, Leggott is entitled to effect this collapse, there seems also to be the need for an additional kind of reading which focusses more on that ambivalence about disclosure which is always threatening to push the sequence's narrative out of sight, as well as on those not infrequent signals that advertise the literary, theatrical quality of these poems. "August, the Paired Butterflies", for example, seems to me to open less on to "Wedde" than onto an array of literary types and archetypes: Pound, and behind him Li Po (in the title); Blake; De Foe; Proust (the cupcake/memory routine); the suspiciously parodic characterisation of the speaker as itinerant *pòete maudit* ("the foreign strange / & sometimes so silent young man / he has had tales to tell of through this / troubled summer").[28] Similarly, the valedictory "At Dante's Tomb" is not, I think, depleted by our recognising that this gorgeous poem is stagier than its intimate pronominal scaffolding might imply:

> These are ironies you will understand who
> live as an infiltrator in the sumptuous
> rooms of your family writing your letters
> to London. Will Pietro Valpreda be free?

Footnotes

27 For example, see pp. 43, 52, 56, 66, 102-110, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde*; similarly, see Lauris Edmond (review of *Spells* and Manhire's *How to take off your clothes at the picnic*, *Landfall* 129, p. 72).

28 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 10.

> The police took Pinelli's guts & lost them.
> Great exiled Dante lies here in Franciscan brown.
> Giuliana I wish you good luck with
> all my heart: that you may soon
> walk in simple shades & all the fire & jade
> of those Umbrian hills
> & bring down justice like a shroud of autumn
> leaves upon the dark houses
> where at present you must work & fret.[29]

Whatever kind of being we might wish to accord her, it is clear that Giuliana Mieli, with that exquisitely romantic name and "that grave hot attention in [her] eyes",[30] is admirably equipped to play the heroine in Wedde's romantic fiction. To those fraught perambulations between London and Italy, those limpid Umbrian autumns, those shades of Dante (again, the poem in its title announces itself as a *literary* meditation first of all) and all those other ghosts named earlier in "August, the Paired Butterflies", let us add Yeats and Maude Gonne who somehow seem to have smuggled themselves in there along with the glamour of revolutionary politics, and also perhaps Byron, waylaid en route for Greece. After all, has not Italy always been the (English) dramatist's favourite setting for romance? None of which has the slightest bearing on questions of sincerity, intensity, or emotional power; all I wish to do is caution against forgetting that we must still be reading fiction.

Whether or not this poetry *wants* to be recognised as fiction is a moot point. As we have seen, in *Sans Souci* there runs counter to the urge towards disclosure an urge towards concealment which is almost as powerful and sometimes threatens to prevail. On the other hand, confessive candour, in as much

Footnotes

29 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 17.
30 Wedde, *Spells*, p. 16.

as it necessarily implies a reality which exists prior to the poem, has epistemological ramifications which lure these writers strongly in its direction. As we saw in Baxter, the word made flesh implies not the fictive but the true word, the word immaculately conceived.

Let us look again at that opening of Edmond's:

> Incarnate: two spiders
> at the hub of the web;
> a cat in the sun
> a slash of light on the floor;
> my hand pressing your buttock
> there.
> Geographic symbiosis.
> The indelible place.

The embrace of "you" and "I" embraces the world which is knowable by the poet. Williams once described the local as "the flesh of a constantly repeated permanence",[31] just as "my hand pressing your buttock / there" represents here the universal writ in tangible terms: "incarnate... / .... / The indelible place". At the hub of their web, Edmond's two spiders are the nerve centre of a vast informational network, and registering in their bodies the movements of its filaments they can read the pulse of what goes on "out there"; like Donne's famous lovers before them, they make of their "little roome" an everywhere. That indelible place where "I" touches "you", that conflation of the concrete and the personal, is the still centre of early Seventies poetics. The personal is the political, certainly, but before that the personal is the phenomenal, the place where we might access the essence of

Footnotes

31 Quoted by James Scully in his *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Fontana, 1966), p. 70.

being, the royal road to the Real. "I'm not good I'm not peaceful I'm not wise / but I love you" (Wedde);[32] "Tonight I embrace you and trust the roof will hold up till morning" (Edmond): whatever else might be negotiable, that embrace can be relied upon: bedrock, *cogito*, first principle.

For Wedde, the world is never more accessible, or his epistemology more confident of its own adequacy, than in his 1975 sequence, *Earthly: Sonnets for Carlos*. The following is from an advertisement for that volume which appeared in *Islands*:

> Goethe wrote somewhere that each new object, truly recognized, opens up a new organ within ourselves. This seems to me a profound and subversive truth which blesses appetite and which militates against orthodoxies, and which can launch us beyond the limits of self-regard into the impure paradise we share with our children ... a function also, as I like to believe, of poetry.[33]

More than at any subsequent stage of his career, the Wedde of *Earthly* seems confident that he can "truly recognise" his "object", that he can open a window on to the real and out of the prison of solipsis: "The window frames a world never doubt that" (16), he asserts, and at the end of a catalogue of concrete images: "when it's arrested like that there it is" (11).[34] This appeal to that realist essentialism, as if reality here were being not so much constructed as *arrested*, recurs repeatedly in *Earthly*:

Footnotes

32 Ian Wedde, Sonnet 10, *Earthly: Sonnets for Carlos* (Akaroa: Amphedesma Press, 1975), unpaged.

33 *Islands* 13, p. 350.

34 Throughout the following discussion of this sequence, numbers in brackets refer to the numbering of the *Earthly* sonnets.

Piss & steam
versus all the rubbish of the ego! (29)

a harbour spreading blue sails of sky/
a great *transparent* cargo sailing for-

ever into its *own* presence.... (8; my italics)

Landscapes are treated as if they themselves were in the habit of playing signifying games:

Barberry puts out
fiery buds early flowers prepare to shout
cold sere hills exhale the yellow colour
of births & marriages: spring, piss, sulphur!
Io Hymen! gorse, broom, lupin, ragwort:
the tough surviving "noxious weeds" hang out
their crass banners.... (27)

In one especially tidy instance the speaker invokes the effects of alcohol as if to dismember the constructive agency of his own intellect:

Yes in a gentle Monday evening lush
I am ready to forgive enemies...

watching Carlos talking to twine, a mess
of paper & wool, a sooty hearthbrush,
a green bus ticket. Against all the harsh
established orthodoxies I set this
sentimental disorder.... (33)

This may not be harsh or particularly orthodox, but neither is it disordered; no amount of liquor will efface the fact that what we are reading here is a measured semiotic construct.

But let us not over-estimate the extent to which Wedde really trusts his own realist cravings. Even as he proclaims "The window frames a world never doubt that", he sounds

suspiciously like a man talking courage to himself -- as we can hear him doing a decade later while the real keeps withdrawing ahead of him: "One day I'll / get it right / (I dream about it) / & the answer will be free of its language / at last....".[35] Meanwhile, though, the baby Carlos helps organise the poems' orientation towards things by virtue of his indiscriminate infantile appetite:

> & creeping on the scarface
> of the earth comes Carlos the jaunty son
> & finds this black shit of eternity
> & stuffs it in his mouth (36)

The infant, more than anyone, is sensually attuned to this local and tangible incidence of the universal ("the black shit of *eternity*"); it is a condition, however, from which he is condemned to lapse:

> His new blue eyes
> see everything. Soon he'll learn to see
> less. (9)

As an infant he is blessed with "a profound / indifference he will lose the knack of"(3): he will be exiled from the possession of things and left in possession only of words which mark the absence of things; he will accede, that is, to the Symbolic order -- the order of the Lacanian Father, from which, in the interim, his own fictive father labours vainly to extricate himself.

Footnotes

35 Wedde, *Georgicon*, p. 11.

As the weight-belt is to the diver, so is Carlos with his new blue eyes to the poet who would plunge through that obfuscating barrier and into some amniotic plenitude on the other side of fiction. "He *is*" (4), affirms his speaker (his italics admitting once again that he suspects he may only be talking courage to himself): Carlos, the fruit of that domestic embrace, is real, prior, absolute, given. Or is he?

> She said
> "It's time" & now I have a son time for
>
> naming the given
> the camellia
> which is casting this hoar of petals (stars?)
> on the grass.... (2)

How much is "given" here and how much is "named"? When it comes time to name the real, shall we say "hoar of petals" or "hoar of stars"? If Carlos is given, then given *by whom*?

> oh, I'd be glad if he became
> a carpenter & built a house for my
> old age: a *paradiso*, well ... but earth-
> ly anyway, straight planks above a plain
> or seacoast, the trees & mountains known, high
> familiar stars still bright in heaven's hearth. (3)

Wedde knows the answer, needless to say. Carlos is to his poet-father as Hemi te tutua is to God: Wedde simply leaves out the middle Man:

> oh you were born there
>
> first of all little Carlos, in the mind,
> & there you live now.... (26)

We are edging ever closer to that problem which this intimate pronoun structure inevitably runs up against. The *"child who turned back"*, of sonnets 17 and 18, received "no recognition & not / even the minimal gift of a name". But just what sort of gift *is* a name: what does it imply to name a child after a father poet, or to imagine him as a carpenter building a *paradiso* for one's old age? This last-named projection follows the admission that he will lose the knack of that profound indifference "in spite of love or because of it more / likely". The child's accession to the Symbolic will be a submission, first of all, to the language he is subjected to by his parents, just as throughout this entire project Carlos as object must submit to his poet-father as subject: beginning life in the poet's mind, the child can only be the poet's creation. Parenthood and poetry start looking profoundly analagous. And this is not good news.

In the advertisement for this volume which I mentioned earlier, Wedde recalls that "the composition was always more like listening than talking",[36] a claim which by now will be instantly recognisable as a variation on Baxter's "slave of God" essentialism. In truth, though, not only does the poet-figure talk all the time, making up as he goes along fictive images of the child and of himself, imposing on his object an identity as parents visit identities on their offspring, but he continues to do it in an imperative voice -- "never doubt that", or "Hang on to yours Carlos it's all you've got" (31) -- in the voice, that is, in which in which parents have always assumed the right to address their children. What is still

Footnotes

36 *Islands* 13, p. 350.

more debilitating, however, and what now appears to make the "third-person you" more or less unusable, is that the authority which we see here visited on the child will be visited on that object pronoun whomever it designates:

2 for Rose

9

"If thy wife is small bend down to her & whisper in her ear" (Talmud)

-- what shall I whisper? that I dream it's no use any more trying to hide my follies. If trees &

suchlike don't tell on me I understand my son will & soon, too. His new blue eyes see everything. Soon he'll learn to see less. O the whole great foundation is sand.

But the drought has broken today, this rain! pecks neat holes in the world's salty fabulous diamond-backed carapace & doubt comes out, a swampy stink of old terrapin.

What shall I say? "I hid nothing from you, but from myself. That I dream, little one,

10

by day & also by night & you are always in the dream ..." Oh you can get no peace, will get none from me. The flower smells so sweet who needs the beans? We should move house there into the middle of the bean-patch: a green & fragrant mansion, why not! Let's do it all this summer & eat next year. O

let's tear off a piece. It's too hard & far to any other dreamt-of paradise & paradise is earthly anyway, earthly & difficult & full of doubt.

I'm not good I'm not peaceful I'm not wise but I love you. What more is there to say. My fumbling voices clap their hands & shout.

Expansive and tender though these sonnets manifestly are, they

are nonetheless informed by the power of the sentence and by the inability of the speaking subject to do anything but subjugate his object pronoun. That the partner is characterised as diminutive -- as in "little one", and earlier that "small wife" to which the epigraph condescends (bend *down* to her") -- only makes explicit what is always implicit in that intimate subject-object power arrangement: that is, the object becomes a child. The subject who decides where "we" will live, what kind of fiction "we" will inhabit and what it will feel like to do so, cannot hope to escape his own authority. Sententiousness inheres in the structure of the sentence itself.

Not surprisingly, we find Edmond also running up against exactly this problem. "Shack", from *End Wall*, is very like Wedde's *"2 for Rose"* in that it explicitly casts its speaker as the Namer of Names, an architect of fictions which his pronominal object can only passively inhabit. Firstly, he discovers a word:

> I read the word shack.
> I like it.
> It is a good solid word.
> It would be good to live in a shack.[37]

Then, as his pronoun shifts into the plural, he "invites" his fictive partner to accept this construct from him, an offer she (as object) is in no position to refuse:

Footnotes

37 Edmond, *End Wall, p. 38.*

Welcome to the shack.
....
Come, let us put ourselves out on the hillside,
let sunbeat drain and dry us,
windbeat drive out the loving heat...
....
Let us be done with concrete and steel...
....
We can boil potatoes in the middle of the floor.
We can stoke the fire.
We can shack it.[38]

To pursue this analysis to its inevitable end, we need only point out that the Namer of Names then legitimises that function with an appeal to the authority of his genitals:

I got sick in the mind, sick at the heart
like Lord Randall returning to his mother
from all the agencies who own the land,
I was sick in the balls
from the way this city was dressed up,
a series of Christmas treats under the richman's
tree I wasn't allowed to unwrap.
Until I found this word shack.[39]

Admirably concise though this poem is in its treatment of the way that people inhabit words and *vice versa*, it now seems less alert than we might hope to the power-political implications of the traffic of language between subject and object.

Given that this hunt for the mark of the Father can be instigated only at ruinous cost to that reader who wishes to write over a poet's text, it is fortunate that both Edmond and Wedde are adaptable and prescient enough to offer an alternative angle of approach. Thus, what is at least as deserving of note as the fact that Edmond makes the odd phallocentric gaffe, is the extent to which *End Wall* already

Footnotes

38 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 38.
39 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 39.

anticipates the theoretical pressures which will subsequently drive him away from this "I"-"you" intimacy.

In particular, I am thinking of that elusive poem "Psyche", which seems to me to be deeply concerned with the way in which the subject assembles itself at the expense of a predicate. The poem begins with the contemplation of McCahon's "Northland Panels", quoting an inscription: "And yes, it may breed despair".[40] Under scrutiny is a problematic "line / scratched between hill and sky" which triggers a series of associations ("It is paint. / It is light. It is the wide line of Yorkshire." etc.),[41] and which, although the poet refrains from expressly stating the connection, bears a suggestive relationship to the line of verse. It is rebuked as possessive ("a line is too large / and owns too much") and poisonous ("It is a line / which I draw round my mind / which infects the whole landscape");[42] if the weather, marching in formation across map or terrain, seems imperialistic, then its capacity to bear down on objects and swallow them is as nothing against the libidinal voracity of language:

> A man says to his wife:
> "Look! You can see the cold front
> advancing."
> But she sees the intricacies of the foreground weeds
> and the ants trundling up and down leaves
> on the same scale as the clouds scurry towards her
> and engulf her.
> For her the paint moves.
> Words advance on each other like wrestlers crying
> "She is mine!" "She is mine!"[43]

Footnotes

40 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 10.
41 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 10.
42 Edmond, *End Wall*, pp. 10, 15.
43 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 10. Joanna Paul's "Yin Yang & Focal Length: Bombastic v Domesticated Space in N.Z. Poetry" (*And* 4, pp. 97-100) offers an interesting angle on the contrasting visual perspectives in this passage.

The second section of the poem is organised around an "I want" structure, from "I want a citroen / and a baby in the back" to "I wanted you to watch me shoot myself".[44] Edmond refers in "In a Year's Turning" to images as "constellations of hunger",[45] which seems to me to be an admirable description of a poem, or indeed of any language act, since language proceeds from desire for the thing which is absent. Again, what this "wanting" section illustrates so vividly is the way in which that hunger devours its object:

> I wanted you to see the walls humming muzak.
> I wanted you to feel silence moving in and out
> of the liftshafts like room service.
> I wanted you to see the food leaking out
> of the windows and curtains.
> I wanted you to see your name in the shape
> of a star across the lintel of the hotel foyer.
>
> You spent time in a dream.
> I wind my mind back
> to a flickery memory of you,
> small strong clear
> a glass full of anemones
> in a white window.
>
> I do not want to talk to my mother all the time.
> She is love and disaster.
> I want to sit still and silent and listen
> to the notes of your bare calloused feet
> on the prison floor.[46]

The more the speaking "I" labours towards "you", the more its surreal metaphoricity pushes "you" ahead of it. "Mirrors like metaphors reveal only themselves", Edmond says in "Notes on the Bedroom".[47] The dream which "you" spends time in here is the

Footnotes

44 Edmond, *End Wall*, pp. 11, 13.
45 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 8.
46 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 46.
47 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 41.

subject's own, a dream in which "you" is continually displaced by projections reflecting only on the subject;[48] what is remembered, after all, is not a person but a glass of flowers. Like the dream, the "prison floor" is once again of the subject's own construction. This "listening" is like Wedde's "more like listening than talking"; what the subject is listening to is a noise that he himself is making, a bookish (and suggestively oedipal) fantasy in which he has incarcerated his object.

Throughout the first three sections of the poem "I" and "you" seem to be separated geographically, and this domination of the object takes place only *inside* the subject's own fictions. In the final section, however, that distance is spanned through the familiar agency of letter-writing, and Edmond follows that letter to show us the object, now dramatised as present, impacted upon by the imperialism of the word:

> I look south to the light where you live
> under the white slant of the sun
> under the shadowy eaves of board
> where time is sinking under the weight
> of my constructions.
>
> Wonderful undersea life!
>
> You are hunched in a green mossy chair
> reading a letter which is an intrusion
> a bathysphere a hungry scavenging eye.
> I am as immortal as drowning![49]

Dropping her a line (the poem itself?), visiting his weighty

Footnotes

48 cf. Wedde: "...I dream, little one, / ... / by day & also by night & you are / always in the dream...." (*Earthly* 10, see my p. 93).

49 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 15.

constructions upon her, the subject infects his object's landscape as the line has already been seen to infect his own. These images are rich in associations, both inside and beyond the poem. The bathysphere, since we have just come from *Earthly*, conjures Wedde's memorial for Neruda: its epigraph reads "Thinking, burying lamps in deep solitude", and Neruda's poems themselves are then described as "green lamps that break / into our solitude", a generous and salutary interruption of isolation.[50] That "hungry scavenging eye", however, points more towards the darker applications of the metaphor, to the lowered eye/I as ravenous intruder, the eye that explains why "The crow is a bird of love".[51] Sylvia Plath knew all about the crow: "No day is safe from news of you, / Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me"; letters ("blank, expansive as carbon monoxide") visit on the passive object the subject's figuration of her.[52] The trunk call will serve the same predatory function: "Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable",[53] the telephone wires the daughter to the mother ("I do not want to talk to my mother all the time. / She is love and disaster.") just as the barnacle-encrusted chain of the bathyspere condemns the object to continue to play child to the absent subject-as-father. Like the glass of anemones that "remained with you when / I was not there",[54] the eye/I/ letter, that possessive pronominal chaperone, stands in for the subject ("I am as immortal as drowning!"), sentencing the object to unceasing struggle if she is not to be co-opted by

Footnotes

50 Wedde, *Earthly* 35.
51 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 14.
52 Sylvia Plath, "The Rival", *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1981), pp. 166-167.
53 Plath, "Medusa", *Collected Poems*, p. 225.
54 Edmond, *End Wall*, p. 13.

someone else's fictions, by those words which "advance on each other like wrestlers crying / 'She is mine!' 'She is mine!'".

ii) *"Your sentence comes back at you"*

This treatment of Edmond's poem I have just been performing, is it too possessive, does it own too much? Clearly yes, in that it did not write itself, is wilful, partial and shies away from many daunting opacities. But for what it may be worth, I suspect that my embellishments are not too untrue to Edmond's intentions. "Psyche" is not a poem which proceeds by logical argument; it moves laterally and, to wrest a *bon mot* from Christopher Norris, resists hermeneutic recovery.[55] In the places where I have been looking, however, I think we can see Edmond beginning to register certain disturbing perceptions which at this stage[56] he may not know quite what to do with, but which will severely inhibit his practice after *End Wall*.

I do not think for a moment, then, that anything I may say about power or possessiveness would come as any news to either of these writers, and I do not wish to sound as if I think I have just invented the wheel. In a sense, as I mentioned in my introduction, this thesis merely picks up suggestions that Edmond and Wedde themselves have put forward. Here is the former, quoted by Harry Ricketts (1986):

Footnotes

55 cf. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (New York and London: Methuen, 1982), p. 68.

56 "Psyche" first appeared in *Islands* 11, 1975.

> Fifteen years ago, when I was starting to write... the big thing was YOUR VOICE -- "FINDING YOUR VOICE" -- which I duly did. But now that line seems to have foundered completely on the rafts of feminism, lacanian freudianism, poststructuralism etc, and I want to write now to draw attention to the occasions of language as they occur -- borrowed language -- to show their use, how they function -- this showing becomes the poem -- it enables the reader -- gives the reader use -- and mystery [mastery?] -- as an architect does with a structure.[57]

Here is Wedde, from the same source, answering a question about Janet Frame:

> So this tradition comes down and it says, "what you individually do with the language is what matters" -- which is a very individualistic attitude to have to such a common cultural property -- not property, such a common cultural phenomenon -- as language. It has pushed it all towards the first person... and in poetry there grew a tradition or an assumption that the voice, the style, the tone, was actually ... very close to the writer's own voice and personality.
>
> H.R. You started talking about somebody having their "own voice".
>
> I.W. Yes, and when you begin to talk like that, then you've absolutely collapsed the gap and you've given language to the writer *to possess.* So Janet Frame's vital relationship to the language was one that said, "You own it." [....] But the tradition, the attitude to language that [Keri Hulme] has ... is one that says, "You do *not* have individual possession of language."[58]

This talk of possession echoes the Wedde of *Tales of Gotham City* (1984) -- "This endless hunt for meanings, / finally a kind of curious greed[59] -- which in turn echoes Edmond's hungry scavenging "I".

At the dawn of the Seventies a poetics of voice appeared

Footnotes

57 *Talking About Ourselves*, pp. 168-169.
58 *Talking About Ourselves*, p. 51.
59 Ian Wedde, "Mahia April 1978", *Tales of Gotham City* (Auckland: Auckland/Oxford, 1974), p. 20.

to be no more than an expression of what was most basic and inalienable -- the integrity of the self, its right to sing,[60] to dramatise an heroics of mind. "I gotta right": thus Wedde quotes Bellow, in one of the epigraphs to *Earthly*. Yet suddenly, thanks to the shattering impact of a new wave of theoretical discourses, that inalienable right starts looking perilously contingent. Maori culture, so Wedde informs us, makes that assumption about individual ownership of language appear, at the very least, culturally relative. The Lacanians and the poststructuralists invert that same assumption: less "I own language" than "I am the invention of language". Feminism alerts us to power-structures latent in discourse, latent even in the sentence itself: "I", it appears, asserts that "right" only at the expense of the object which it subjugates, and if that male self which strides so confidently through that (startlingly androcentric) Seventies eruption is not in fact "itself" but rather the product of language, it then becomes a self whose erection is contingent on patriarchal assumptions informing that language in which it traffics.

Cutting down those old authoritarian stilts, then, now appears to have less to do with the identity of the object than with the subject position itself. Which is to say, the very meaning of the word "subject" has changed:

> 4 "Your exact position becomes critical." Matisse noted this after all the fuss and worry over line, colour, tone. All these painterly qualities are subservient to this one question - "How critical is the placement of the subject?"[61]

Footnotes

60 cf. Roger Horrocks, "'"Natural" as only you can be!'", p. 101.

61 Edmond, "Notes on the Bedroom", *End Wall*, p. 40.

When Matisse refers to "the placement of the subject", I assume he is referring to his model, to what we now tend to call the object, thus generating an ambiguity which I imagine Edmond would enjoy. If, however, we take "subject" to mean the artist himself, then we have a fair description of Edmond's current preoccupations -- not so much what it means for "I" to address "you" as what it means to say "I" in the first place. It will do also to describe the Wedde of *Castaly* and since, though not as well, I think, as that statement of his own (from the back cover of *Tales of Gotham City*), which supplies this thesis with its title: "That's me trying to step out of that sentence".

By way of introducing Edmond's most recent volume, let me begin with some statistics. By my count, of the sixteen poems in *End Wall*, nine have an intimate "third-person you" structure, six have a public "second-person you" (geography master)[62] structure (though two of these, "Hey Paris" and "Notes on the Bedroom", make claims to being placed in the first category), and one poem, "A House by the Sea", subtitled "An Open Letter to Russell Haley", is precisely that, addressing a particular "third-person you" but making no pretence of originating in private. By contrast, of the eighteen poems in *Letters and Paragraphs*, one ("Midday/Midnight Letter") uses that intimate "third-person you", one ("Two Paragraphs") uses the "first-person you", and one (the long poem "Hypochondria") uses a kind of *genera mixta*; that leaves by far the greater part of the volume using one of three expressly public-oriented structures: the open letter (six

Footnotes

62 In a Seventies context this term requires some qualification (see my comments on Wedde, p. 117).

poems, though two of these ["About Wasps", "Old Hat Song"] could equally be placed in the following bracket), the geography master structure (seven poems), and a "he"/"she" structure (two poems). The results of this head-counting seem to reflect the change of direction which Edmond's work has undergone.

I find myself impelled to quote "Midday/Midnight Letter" because of the concise way in which it pushes forward the analogy which was making itself vexingly explicit by the end of my discussion of "Psyche":

> tonight you were coming back to
> life -- "When a name comes at me
> out of the blue, I can't remember
> it -- don't laugh at me" -- you scolded
> your mother, your laughter licking
> clean the sky of its accumulated
> affronts and small acid shapes
> and you slunk into the bathroom
> at midnight like a comedian
> dressed in absurd splendour in
> silk combinations, reading into
> each piece of information the joke
> of yourself --[63]

The way in which "I" here glosses the actions of "you" resembles, and explicitly ("like a comedian / dressed in absurd splendour... / ... reading into / each piece"), nothing so much as the performance of the literary critic. It is not the "romantic idiocy"[64] of the word "like" that impresses here so much as its possessiveness, its imperialism, its libidinal mania for co-option, con-struction, mis-reading. "You" reads

Footnotes

63 Murray Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs* (Christchurch: Caxton, 1987), pp. 9-10.

64 cf. Ian Wedde, "The 1976 Bullet McHale Winter Lectures", *Castaly* (Auckland: Auckland/Oxford, 1980), p. 56.

nothing "into / each piece of information": the reading here, the joke, is entirely *mine*.

But there is no need to labour this matter just now, for though this structure once again opens the volume, Edmond appears to be letting it go:

> A letter like a sandwich --
> food of the delicate, unsustained
> hiatus of day, Frank O'Hara
> fare -- to sit beside you
> in bed writing you a letter,
> as deliciously repetitious
> as sharing a sandwich after
> lovemaking --[65]

O'Hara is important to Edmond and Wedde alike -- for that fondness, derived from Williams and shared with Ted Berrigan, for trying to animate the personal and trivial (what he calls "my 'I do this I do that' / poems");[66] for his general expansiveness and friendliness; and particularly for the intimate and "transparent" arrangement of his pronouns.[67] I suspect, though, that he features in this particular poem, less in acknowledgement of a specific debt than in acknowledgement of "the literary" in general. Wedde does much

Footnotes

65 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 9.

66 Frank O'Hara, "Getting up ahead of someone (sun)", *The selected poems*, p. 163.

67 In "Personism: A Manifesto" O'Hara (in a tone which may not invite too much solemnity) describes how he came upon a new way of writing: "I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. [....] The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages." (*The selected poems*, p. xiv.) Charles Molesworth observes of O'Hara's work: "...these are the most autobiographical poems we have; they make "confessional" poetry seem alexandrine by comparison" (*The Fierce Embrace* [Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1979], p. 85).

the same thing in *Georgicon*, emphasising his modes of production, fencing off his lyric habits with inverted commas. Whereas Edmond used to offer this kind of poem simply as the natural with a wall removed, here he seems intent on foregrounding its origins in literary convention.

This denaturalisation of the text, a determination to own its artificiality, its constructedness, is insisted upon throughout the collection. It helps explain, I think, the difference between those verse-letter poems and earlier more private pieces. A letter/poem addressed to a named public figure announces at its outset that it is aimed at an unseen congregation; it is formalised, advertising its provenance in the literary -- public words for a public arena. Accordingly these poems can and do partake of the same public and political concerns (let us say, crudely, Race Gender Class) to which the rest of the volume addresses itself so diligently. Even a piece dedicated to the poet's small daughter ("Old Hat Song") has as much to do with Springbok tours as with family. The world which is knowable, and *must be addressed*, is no longer adequately circumscribed by that embrace of "I" and "you". Pronouns must now reach more widely, and the verse-letter poem and the geography master poem ("Writer's Report", "Account of Events at Boulder Bay..." etc) are interchangeable in respect of their ability to do so. However, if these public pronouns announce a newly aggressive engagement with the realm of brute politics, there is also I suspect a sense in which this aggression represents a "best form of defence". If sententiousness inheres in the sentence itself, then the poet is always going to be lecturing someone, and Edmond now appears

to feel more comfortable in the schoolroom than in the Master Bedroom.

But if it now seems safer once again to direct one's language at the public rather than at an intimate Other, Edmond avows in conversation with Ricketts that he would rather not be using his own language in the first place. Such are the logical ramifications of that critique of voice which we have seen Wedde and Edmond venturing:

> [Passes over "Ode to Auckland"] And that's why I come at trying to change the way the personal voice works -- not using my language, but showing how I can reveal the way language is working.... Some of them have my own words in them, but mainly they're either quotations from nineteenth century people... or they're quotations from my own notebooks or literal quotations of what people were saying at the time which I wrote down.[68]

"Ode to Auckland" is the purest and most extreme of a number of poems from towards the end of the volume which do rely to an extent on other people's language. In one column it lists (I believe I am correct in saying) the Maori names of Auckland's volcanic hills; down a facing column, in the sparest, least inflected language the poet can summon, are listed the fates of these sites at the hands of the pakeha. Under the title rides the inscription, "from the wall of the War Memorial Museum, Auckland".[69]

Replacing this poem in the context in which it was originally published (the fourth and final issue of *And*), and noting that its title echoes Edmond's problematic precursor, Baxter,[70] we can see it partaking in a sweeping reaction

Footnotes

68 *Talking About Ourselves*, p. 169.
69 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 47.
70 Similarly, in "Two Paragraphs" (*Letters and Paragraphs*,

against a now debased centric expressivity. Turn the page of that *And*, for example, and we find a piece by Susan Davis and Anne Maxwell, not only written collaboratively, but again compiled largely from other people's language, the sources listed for the reader at the end.[71] Joanna Paul's "Yin Yang & Focal Length: Bombastic v Domestic Space in N.Z. Poetry" is put together exclusively from lines she has lifted from other poets. Again, in work by Charlotte Wright ("Songs of Six Friends") and Richard von Sturmer ("Six Friends *In Their Own Words*" [my italics])[72] we can observe this shying away from subject-centred utterance, from the drama of "you" and "I", from what Alan Brunton once described (with a rather unfortunate selection of pronoun) as "the poet as his own hero".[73]

There is a sense, of course, in which this kind of "found" writing begins once again to disguise and re-mystify the subjective agency of the author, and this is a problem which we will come back to *via* Leigh Davis. Meanwhile, however, let us pursue that critique of personal voice into the long poem, "Hypochondria", which (following "Ode to Auckland") closes the volume.

Edmond has a long-standing commitment to drama, and "Hypochondria" is presented, metaphorically, as theatre, with its acts, scenes, "characters" and stage directions. Poetry is always "theatrical", of course, but this poem's emphasis on staginess places an explicit distance between itself and an

Footnotes

pp. 11-12) we can hear Edmond continuing to chew over his relationship to Baxter.

71 "Speaking Bones", *And* 4. pp. 48-56.

72 *And* 4, pp. 24-30.

73 Brunton, editorial, *Freed* 1, unpaged.

earlier writing which tried to pass the theatrical off as the natural. As the title suggests, it is deeply concerned with the frailty and vulnerability of the body.[74] The body, however, is not the "self": the self, rather, is more like a theatre, housing as it does a cast of characters which includes a father, a mother, and "X" ("Also a character") who "moves through the drama like the / subtext of an illness".[75] This diffusion of the expressive centre is encouraged by a measured inconsistency of pronouns: the central poet-like character refers to himself variously as "I", "you" and "he", and it is often not clear to which of the "characters" any particular pronoun refers (tactics reminiscent of the Davis we shall meet in *Willy's Gazette*).

It is not that the poem is particularly mysterious about its debt to the sensibility of an author. The illness is primarily the illness of the writer figure (see "The book... / ...falls open", below), and clues are dropped in that link that figure to the sensibility organising other poems in this and earlier volumes.[76]

What is insisted on, however, is that this centre itself (the "self") is not centred. This is one function of that mobile signifer "X", a wild card, a shadowy Other, which keeps surfacing to remind us of the de-centred nature of that staged identity. The poem describes itself initially as "An equation of feeling with history",[77] one implication of which is that

Footnotes

74 cf. "A Coat", "Account of Events at Boulder Bay, Otago Peninsula", *Letters and Paragraphs*, pp. 29-30, 33-34.

75 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 55.

76 For example, "'dipped in electricity'" (*Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 62) is a phrase picked up from "Telephoning It" (*End Wall*, p. 27; also published earlier in *Patchwork* [unpaged]).

77 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 51.

only my oedipal past can account for how I feel, for my illness:

> Across the cyclorama, a free flow of small pieces
> of paper indicates perhaps snow, or memory,
> a cold place, waiting for a sign.
> Revenge is on the shopping list.
> An ant slips down a crack between two stones.
> The children sleep in their beds.
> Hair begins to grow out of the hole where we buried mother.
> The book of photos tracing his history
> from the moment the sickness began falls open
> on a summer night when, in 1952, two or three years old,
> a stoat ran across the back garden.
> Seen from the battlements, the garden is overgrown now.
> Grizzled, a sable silvered vicious mole
> of nature, he looks down. And here is one
> of mother before we put her in the sack....[78]

My historical reality, blanketed by memory, awaits its resurrection in the sign. But what the sign uncovers is itself irrecoverable, its latent "content" impenetrable. The "vicious mole" on the battlements (i.e. Father, see also pp. 51, 64) has taken up residence inside my head, and even if I could touch "the thalamus", the place where the nerve emerges from the brain and hence perhaps a node of "authentic" speech, it turns out that the old mole and the thalamus itself are one.[79] Further, my dictionary informs me that "thalamus" also means "inner room, women's apartment", and so Mother too ("buried", put in "the sack") has gone underground to the place of desire, and abides there, determining my hungering in language and over-determining the signifier "I".

The hub of the web, then, is not where it once was. "I" now opens, not on some indelible domestic reality, but on an impenetrable problematics of appetite and signification. Not

Footnotes

78 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 54.
79 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 53.

that any of this defuses the authoritarian iniquities of expressivity:

> all history is told backwards feeling
> is projective roving the boundaries of its
> sentence so here's a problem (at last)
> how to unmaster it getting to the end
> loss and accumulation driving in the same
> general direction[80]

Loss begets language, and language accumulates, possessively, dispensing power. A Freudian hermeneutics might seem to "unmaster" history in as much as it helps us to understand the way we are constrained by it. But how can you unmaster desire itself and stop "getting / caught in your own self-infective loop the / loop of your own fiction"?[81] And how can you deflect that will-to-possess which *inheres in* that structure which gives desire speech? These rhetorical questions will surface again as we look at that response which they elicit from Davis. Meanwhile, their obliterating scope should not be allowed to disguise the fact that there is, at any rate, no way back through nostalgia for an illusory integrity of voice.

As I have suggested, that "first-person you" with which we leave Edmond at the end of *Letters and Paragraphs*, is the pronoun one turns to when the going gets toughest, and Wedde, in particular, follows Curnow in turning to it when his questions are at their most private and unanswerable. It is the pronoun you turn to when no longer sure if you can span that gulf between "I" and "you", when no longer sure if you know anything in the first place, and when worried about what

Footnotes

80 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*, p. 63.
81 Edmond, *Letters and Paragraphs*. p. 64.

it might do to the people who have to listen to you. As I mentioned earlier, when Wedde speaks about this pronoun he likes to quote from "You Will Know When You Get There": "Down you go alone, so late, into the surge-black fissure".[82] *You* gotta walk that lonesome valley: among other things, then, it is a mask that one might wear to address death.

And it is the pronoun with which Wedde, quite specifically in "Angel", announces the collapse of the confidence that buoyed up *Earthly* and the later parts of *Spells*, with which he turns his own gun on himself: "your own sentences coming back at you".[83] "Angel" shows us Wedde up against the wall, rounded on by his own constructions, holed up in the object position which is the receiving end of his own sentence:

> This is your beach-head
> right here
> right here
> Angel. One step back
> & you're off & there's nothing
> behind you....[84]

If I say "Wedde" here, rather than "the subject", then I am recanting to an extent of my own formalism, assenting to the leap that Leggott makes when she refers to "an incremental bitterness (pretended solicitude) which could only be auto-referential".[85] However, so relentlessly does "Angel" parody the procedures of the earlier Wedde that it does seem to extend a considered invitation to collapse that addressee, if not into the man himself, then at least into the sensibility organising

Footnotes

82 See *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1985). p. 210; for Wedde on Curnow, see n.89, p. 67.
83 Wedde, *Castaly*, p. 45.
84 Wedde, *Castaly*, p. 46.
85 Leggott, *The Poetry of Ian Wedde*, p. 172.

the earlier work.

As it did Curnow before him, then, this anxiety about the reliability of his own procedures drives Wedde into the second person. To address yourself to an intimate Other (*Spells, Earthly*), or to the public at large, geography-master-style ("Pathway to the Sea"),[86] you at least need to *think* that you know what you are up to. The Wedde who arrives with "Angel", however, is a poet whose epistemology is threatening to come unstuck, as he will record in *Georgicon*:

> Sad to say however
> the hardware shop has gone
> the one in
> Real Street; the place
> you could get things
> the weight of them
> dragged your arms down
> there were ideas too
> but they left
> "the customer"
> to make the connections[87]

The confidence which once allowed the modernist (note the Williams echoes) poet-as-hero to visit his authority on lover, child, or perhaps even the reading public ("the people who worked /.../ in the hardware shop / knew their stuff / they reached out / and found what they / wanted: you / could ask their advice"[88]) has deserted him. He is driven back now on those private, unanswerable questions which precede the possibility of telling anyone else *anything*.

The "first-person you" creates a closed circuit, a subject which is also its own object, and thus it furnishes the safest

Footnotes

86 Wedde, *Castaly*, pp. 13-22.
87 Wedde, "paradise alley", *Georgicon*, p. 23.
88 Wedde, *Georgicon*, p. 23.

arena in which to explore one's own ethical and epistemological troubles. Seemingly permitting a minimum discharge of authority, it serves the preservation of public safety: the only person you are likely to hurt is yourself. Having been guilty of fraudulent practices, you and no one else will have to take the rap:

> -- hey, across there's
> Mt Crawford. The millionaire embezzler
> plays 500
> for cigarettes
> there. That's
> where you get off
> Angel. That's where your
> sentence comes back
> at you. You
> cheap bastard. This is where
> you never listen.[89]

And increasingly, the self-assured family man of *Earthly* is suspected of epistemological fraud, of elaborating too glibly from the phenomenal, and eliding over the problematics of "see[ing] beyond the window and [his own] reflection".[90] Once one moved effortlessly in the natural, lowering oneself into fluencies and patterns as into Horrocks's satirical warm bath:[91]

> ah they
> filled your nostrils then Angel like an offshore breeze
> in spring yes
> gorse-flower & jasmine, something
> rare like that.[92]

Footnotes

89 Wedde, *Castaly*, p. 45.
90 Wedde, "The 1976 Bullet McHale Winter Lectures", *Castaly*, p. 56.
91 Horrocks, "'"Natural" as only you can be', p. 102.
92 Wedde, *Castaly*, p. 46.

Now, though, transparency gives way to reflexivity, and poetry, like that "*roman à clef* / (in which you feature as a style)",[93] seems unable to find a way out of the prison of its own textuality:

> there doesn't seem to be a key in here
> to unlock the electric light room door
> out to where the birds are that
> you can hear drinking the yellow kowhai, singing
> & singing in the real world.[94]

In the past, too, there were existential evasions for which one must now call oneself to account. The buoyant self-sufficiency of that Woodstock-generation poetics, like that "Tin Cup Dream" of regenerative landscape and stoned hippie purity, was only ever achieved through the expediency of shutting out the cries of the drowned: "*Listen to them, Angel*".[95] Besides, there always inhered in that ideal the likelihood of a slow degeneration into the complacency of middle-class middle-age, stoking the solipsistic barbecue:

> we will depreciate into some kind of pleasure
> baked eggplants bursting their skins
> a lamb turning above slow coals.
> Alternatively
> we will appreciate
> somewhere else, I mean the values.
>
> ....
>
> In this corner of the garden
> melancholy somnambulism
> smell of herbs crushed underfoot
> thin blue smoke
> through the aromatic air[96]

Footnotes

93 Wedde, "Bullet McHale", *Castaly* p. 56.
94 Wedde, "Bullet McHale", *Castaly*, p. 94.
95 Wedde, "Angel", *Castaly*, pp. 49-50
96 Wedde, "Chophouse Log", *Castaly*, p. 71.

In one sense we can see this closed-circuit pronoun as a logical out-growth of that ambivalence (*Sans Souci*) about stable-looking, novelistic structures and the way that sunken narratives swim to the surface of them. Sometimes a further pronoun still appears in the mix, but although in the extract that follows we can see it carefully differentiated from the speaking voice (see the italicised "*your* heart"), the effect produced is of a gesture towards narrative rather than (as in *Spells*) of a measured flirtation with a narrative already in place:

> She is dying
> your mark
>
> on her eyelids
> on her lips bright
> with music: (she says)
>
> 'Why did you cross
> the road?
> The city
>
> has made me deaf.
> You have made me blind.
> I heard you stop
>
> the flow
> with your stride. I saw
> you were crossing
>
> to me. Now
> I hear nothing.
> I do not see you.
>
> I do not wish to live.'
> *Your* delicate heart
> quivers in the tide
>
> of your body....[97]

But though we may not want to start playing biographical

Footnotes

97 Wedde, "Bullet McHale", *Castaly*, pp. 57-58.

guessing games, it is hard to escape a profound sense of anxiety about the relationship between poet-as-subject and lover-as-object:

> You are going
> to praise the vista
>
> in a poem. She will step out
> upon its surface
> & drown.[98]

You create the fiction for *her* to inhabit/drown in; *you* place your fatal mark on *her* eyelids: would it not be infinitely safer just to talk to yourself?

It is safer even, it now appears, to talk directly to the general public, which seems to be Edmond's attitude in *Letters and Paragraphs*. Wedde, too, from *Castaly* onwards, does a certain amount of it. Transplanted to Wellington, or "Gotham City", or "the carrion capital" as Wedde calls it in *Georgicon*,[99] you meet with a sense of obligation to identify the enemy and speak your "truths" baldly -- even if you fear the simplifications involved and doubt your ability to get the message through: "Some things have to be said simply / but then we don't believe them".[100] At times, then, this civic responsibility calls forth the "I"-"you" manner of the geography master, as in "Pathway" or the middle section of *Gotham City*, and (more ironically, and with more self-consciously comic intent) "Don't Listen" and "Off/Of". To

Footnotes

98 Wedde, *Castaly*, p. 58.
99 Wedde, "bees of Aristaeus", *Georgicon*, p. 22,
100 Wedde, "Bird", *Tales of Gotham City*, p. 30. On this theme, see Michele Leggott: "You move in the inner city. You shift into the second person, become derisive, defensive, and above all evaluative...." ("Certainties & Aches", *Islands* 31/32).

allude to that early Curnow-Baxter arrangement, here and as I have earlier with reference both to Wedde and to Edmond, is to risk a slight crudity. It is not, that is, to suggest that these writers downplay that "I" and assume a nationwide constituency. What it does suggest, however, is a reorganisation of the direction of their utterance, so that the implicit "you" (Wedde's "citizen", for example) is no longer dramatised as internal to the poem, but appeals instead to a more general audience.

Elsewhere, and particularly in *Georgicon*, Wedde now exploits the flexible, collective properties of the "first-person you", a pronoun which spreads its net wider after *Castaly*. In one or other form this "first-person you" is the dominant pronoun in Wedde's post-*Spells* volumes, and the pronoun which makes way for it is, as we would expect, that intimate "third-person you". In *Castaly*, for example, all I can find is a possible (but unconfirmed) sighting in "Joseph Conrad Eyes", a fleeting glimpse in "Spring Bouquet" and "Signs of the Times (but only as a detail among others in mindscapes and structures that do not depend on it), and one *bona fide* appearance in "The Air You Breathe". Even in this last example the object pronoun appears cut free from reference, more like a pronoun out of Manhire than out of *Spells*:

> When the lights go out
> you will be in heaven
> smiling for no one
> to see, the breath of the world's
> lovers will approach your face.[101]

Footnotes

101 Wedde, *Castaly*, p. 74.

And while the concentration of these suspicions of that structure at the tail-end of *Castaly* might suggest that Wedde is at that stage regaining interest in it, *Gotham City* does not confirm this. It makes only one full-blown appearance in that volume ("A Lifetime"), and though it can be glimpsed in the two long-ish East Coast poems, it appears there in consort with both more public and more introspective pronouns and not as any kind of anchoring structure. It is only in *Georgicon* that that "you" re-surfaces, in the two pieces which end-stop the book. Its treatment here, however, taints it strongly with irony. "A Short History of Rock & Roll", "Beautiful Golden Girl of the Sixties": both poems, as their titles suggest, flirt with nostalgia and retrogression. The "you" of the former segues into and out of the "you" of all those inane song titles, pointing up its formulaic status and pushing nostalgia for the use of it into the same unlikely category as the rest of the poem's backward leanings:

> I still feel so young, I got
> you babe[102]

Again, in "Beautiful Golden Girl of the Sixties", Wedde plays the self-conscious retro-rocker. His catalogue of trysting places sounds like a parody of the sort of thing he might have ventured sporadically and in earnest in *Earthly* or *Spells*.[103] Which is not to say the poem is a joke, but merely

Footnotes

102 Wedde, *Georgicon*, p. 9

103 For example, Leggott can observe of *Earthly*: "Sonnets 6-10 are a candid account of Carlos' conception, including allusions to some less-than rapturous circumstances which attended it" (*The Poetry of Ian Wedde*, p. 62).

that it seems determined to wear its intimacy so brazenly as to be sure to have laughed at itself before we do.[104] As such, I think it would be fair to say, it advertises the problems which Wedde's pronouns seem increasingly to have been causing him. We can see it in the comic juggling act he performs in "winnow" and "tri", in that arch and literal encoding of the object ("Victor Charlie / what do I have to tell you") in "refrain ha ha", and even in the mock despair the question elicits in the David Dowling *Landfall* interview.[105] It was less of a problem in that bitter group of poems from *Castaly*, where that "first-person you" was the only candidate for the job. Lately when Wedde reaches for a pronoun he seems to reach down this whole pronoun problematic with it.

iii) *Approaching Manhire*

In many ways, Bill Manhire's cagey, elusive work dissents expressly from the manifest candour of late Baxter or early Wedde and Edmond. The approach I have taken to these latter poets, then, appears likely to confirm that picture of Manhire which inhabits our conversation about Seventies poetry. Stead, for example, in that influential historicisation ("From Wystan to Carlos"), brackets Manhire off from his contemporaries on

Footnotes

104 This last phrase is borrowed from Gwendolyn MacEwen's "The Void", *The T.E. Lawrence Poems* (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1982), p. 64.

105 Wedde, *Georgicon*, pp. 19-20, 25; that encoding is "literal", of course, in as much as "Victor Charlie" is (parodic) Vietnam-era code. In the Dowling interview, see pp. 170, 180 (*Landfall* 154).

the grounds that he supposedly owes least to Stead's particular version of the "Modernist tradition".[106] Six years later, reviewing *Zoetropes*, Peter Alcock describes Manhire as "eccentric" and concludes by observing "how 'European' Manhire's 'New Zealand' poetry is".[107]

This picture of Manhire as eccentric outsider, in tandem with the fact that (with Wedde) he had shared the bulk of such critical plaudits as have been handed down to poets of their vintage, seems to make him an important test of any model we might use to carve a shape out of the Seventies. Consequently, what I now mean to do is to shift Manhire's work into the focal position and see how my Seventies paradigm manages to cope with it. At first I imagine this approach will simply confirm a view of Manhire as "other", but then by zeroing in on his arrangements of pronouns I hope we may be able to turn "Manhire" (the critical construct) around.

Manhire's verse has never doubted that it is made out of words, not out of things. While the later Baxter and the earlier Edmond and Wedde all project coherent, realistic contexts inside which their poems are staged, a Manhire poem is more likely to originate in the *suppression* of context, in the cutting free of a semiotic construct from the coordinates that would lend it narrative coherence.

Manhire plays on this occlusion constantly. For instance, he has a particular fondness for riddles -- "The Anglo-Saxon Onion", "Zoetropes", a poem which is simply called "Riddle" -- poems, that is, which revolve around the thing they

Footnotes

106 Stead, "From Wystan to Carlos", p. 483.

107 Peter Alcock, [one of] "Two Responses", *Landfall*, 154, pp. 240, 244.

suppress.[108] Similarly, he teases us with proper names. To entitle a poem "The L & R song"[109] is to state that the poet is in possession of explanatory information which he is simply not going to let us have, much like Wedde with his "Victor Charlie"; in "Bones", Manhire flaunts the same set of confessive expectations, offering us what seems to be a piece of jealous slander ("Davidson told me / you know what / to do with your body.") but which is so void of context that it contracts into the play of disembodied signifiers, leaving the reader's prurience whetted but unsatisfied.[110] The same game is played in still denser fashion in that meticulously regional poem "Wellington", where because it is not *quite* stated that "The man himself" is sleeping with his secretary, and because there is no conclusive syntactical linkage between "The man himself" and "Muldoon Real Estate", the poet comes across like an old hand from the press gallery, invoking the local gossip while tip-toeing studiously round the libel laws.[111]

And what, I wonder, would our gossip columnist make of "Night Windows Carey's Bay"?

> You write a long poem
> about how you are sorting yourself out at last
> and how at last you say
> there'll never be another word
> about departure. Look
> around you how the moon
> tattooes the spaces all around you,

Footnotes

108 Bill Manhire, *Good Looks* (Auckland: Auckland/Oxford, 1982), pp. 29, 33; *Zoetropes* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 78.

109 Manhire, *How to take off your clothes at the picnic*, p. 32.

110 Manhire, *How to take off your clothes at the picnic*, p. 39.

111 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 40.

it isn't even dark. In the house
of doors, the doors are open.
In the house of glass, the glass lets in the light.[112]

After the later Wedde, this is recognisable enough as the voice of that introspective "first-person you" ("You write a long *poem*") confronting itself with some sticky questions. Except that when the poem first appeared in *Islands*[113] it carried a dedication -- "to Ralph and Cilla" -- which in tempting us with those inter-personal coordinates, suggests a new narrative structure and a new poem. It could even lure us to speculate about how Manhire's poems get put together, about what John Ashbery calls "This leaving-out business" and, in this context, what "A world / released from reference" might mean.[114] Ashbery's poem here seems to admit to a certain defensiveness informing the creative procedure, and one can sometimes sense something similar in Manhire's emphatic suppression of reference. It seems so like Manhire to rewrite the relation of signifier to signified as "the sound of things in *hiding*",[115] and he himself has likened his earlier work to standing round on street corners wearing dark glasses.[116]

Footnotes

112 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 52.
113 *Islands* 31/32, p. 17.
114 John Ashbery, "The Skaters":

> But this is an important aspect of the question
> Which I am not ready to discuss, am not all ready to,
> This leaving-out business.
> ....
> ... I am not ready
> To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation....

Selected Poems (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 37. The second phrase is Manhire's, from "Water, A Stopping Place", *Zoetropes*, p. 74.
115 Manhire, "Girl Reading", *Zoetropes*, p. 77 (my italics).
116 Manhire, seminar, University of Canterbury, 11/9/86.

But of course language *is* a world released from reference: the public, we are warned in "The poetry reading", does not have access to those "certain small animals" but only to "the green fields / In which they have chosen to make their homes",[117] and this is true whether the poet wills it so or not. It is only a delusion that imagines that a poem can ever refrain from hiding things, that language can be prevented from taking over, that we can hope to arrest that diffusion which takes James Merrill's "Live, spitting pronouns" and translates them into "windiest / Esperanto".[118] Similarly, Pound can do nothing to protect his poem from that comic coagulation of meanings which now decorates his "gilded Pavlova".[119] These are Manhire's facts of life:

> The books showed how the bodies grew
> though the books themselves weren't bodies.
> We put down other questions and passed them
> to the front, and that was reproduction.
> The trees we saw were diagrams of trees
> with bodies underneath. How far away
> those bodies seemed, how cold
> they must be now beneath the skies, making
> their way through snow by word of mouth
> and multiplying as they move towards us.[120]

Our constructs, it seems, are irremediably promiscuous, deviating, snowballing, picking up signifieds, breeding new meanings as they put themselves about among the various lives of those people whom they come to keep house with.[121]

Footnotes

117 Manhire, "The poetry reading", *How to take off your clothes*, p. 12.

118 James Merill, "Under Libra: Weights and Measures" *Braving the Elements* (London: Chatto & Windus: 1973), p. 46.

119 cf. Manhire's introductory remarks, *The Young New Zealand Poets*, p. 122.

120 Manhire, "The Voyeur: An Imitation", *Good Looks*, p. 42.

If Manhire, from the outset, is painfully aware of the unstable and fictive relationship between language and lived experience, his protagonists are nonetheless far from immune to the perils of misapprehending that relationship. It is "rumoured", after all, that we inhabit our own constructions,[122] as Edmond has demonstrated so concisely in "Shack", and a sceptical epistemology will not of itself protect us from our desire to live in our own words or from their power to generate expectations of the things to which we believe they refer:

> and when we stopped
> we slept on the parchment floor,
> taking it for the real thing.
> We wrote out the poem and slept on it.[123]

Here is another Manhire subject confusing "the poem" and "the real thing":

> John Keats,
> what is he counting on,
> his fingers? No
>
> John Keats is counting on
> the morning -- the clouds rise
> skyward one by one
> from all his fingers.
>
> He stands tiptoe
> on a little hill.[124]

Footnotes

121 cf. statement from *The Elaboration*, Manhire, and drawings by Ralph Hotere (Wellington: Square & Circle, 1972), p. 29.

122 cf. "words we are rumoured to live in" ("The incision", *How to take off your clothes*, p. 11), and again, "We learned our early / slow advances out of books...." ("The Voyeur: An Imitation", *Good Looks*, p. 42).

123 Manhire, "An Outline", *Good Looks*, p. 67.

124 Manhire, "The Swallow", *Good Looks*, p. 23.

Rather than recognise, like a good formalist, the manufactured nature of his version of Nature, the Romantic poet-figure mistakes his sign-language and the fiction which he builds with it ("the clouds rise / ... / *from all his fingers*") for the thing itself. No stout Cortez he, Keats stands on his "little hill" and inflates his inventions into wild surmises, trusting ("counting on") the vista and oblivious of his own agency. Later, he could almost be Wedde, complete with wishful italics:

> Maybe there *will* be a situation
> in which the lot stands revealed,
> maybe it's already shaping up,
> coming from somewhere
> where it once looked good.[125]

If only there were some stable source of meaning which might make such a revelation possible -- Plato's Cave ("somewhere / where it once looked good"), perhaps, or how about dreams? How about astrology?

> We wake at night for example
> among the examples. The stars themselves
> are full of right results....[126]

Turning away from the unlikely possibility of being able to hook into anything durable, the poem resigns itself to its limited application:

Footnotes

125 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 23.
126 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 23.

> And this poem called "The Swallow",
> either it is destined to be purely culinary
> or it's about the clear blue sky
> which all the birds were leaving.[127]

For "purely culinary" we might read "purely technical", "purely meta-poetic"; alternatively, we might read "object to be consumed blithely", "swallowed" while at the same time we dismiss it as impenetrable and ephemerally aesthetic in the timid and/or patronising manner which has at times characterised the approach of Manhire's reviewers.[128] Beyond that, the poem is once again "about" the thing which is necessarily absent, the "clear blue sky" with not a swallow in sight, about language which has eclipsed utterly whatever it is that might have preceded it:

> a) The lover makes a loud noise.
> b) Then the lover is hidden entirely.[129]

So far, by addressing Manhire with the same kinds of question that were aimed at Edmond and Wedde, we are getting a fairly predictable result. If all this epistemological wariness is now similarly evident in those latter poets, they come at it nonetheless by way of a "realist"

Footnotes

127 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 23.

128 Lauris Edmond, for example, reviewing *How to take off your clothes*, remarks: "I hope these poems are never analysed by students preparing for examinations. They should not be subjected to such brutal treatment." (*Landfall* 154, p. 76.) Roger Horrocks, by contrast, discussing "Water, A Stopping Place", is struck by "...how much ... pressure the poem seems ready to accept" ("'"Natural" as only you can be'", p. 121). I am confident that my own treatment of Manhire will bear out that strength and resilience of his work.

129 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 24.

phase of which there is no equivalent in Manhire. We are confirming, that is, a view of Manhire as outsider, a difficult and slightly old-worldly formalist in the company of more forthright contemporaries. However, if we turn our attention to his pronouns we will find, I believe, that the trajectory of their organisation answers with remarkable precision to that paradigm with which I have been experimenting.

Again, then, some demography. Of the eighteen poems in *The Elaboration* (1972), and again speaking very crudely, eleven use what looks like an intimate "third-person you", while seven use more "public" structures. Two things need to be stated clearly. Firstly, when I say "third-person you" I am not suggesting that we can see the body underneath the tree; all I have in mind here is that "you" cannot sensibly designate the reader or (at least in most cases) the speaker himself, which seems to imply that "you" points at a fictive Other. Secondly, it has to be remembered that Manhire's poems refuse so flatly to "articulate solutions to the business of living"[130] that those "public" arrangements are never seriously so; he is fond, for example, of playing the geography master ("Contemplation of the Heavens" and "Zoetropes" are two well-known examples) but that reticence infuses the structure with heavy irony. I identify these formations as "public", then, only to distinguish them from those that posit an intimate Other or whose signals are more strongly auto-referential.

Moving on to *How to take off your clothes at the picnic* (1977) we find very much the same distribution: somewhere between twenty-one and twenty-six "third-person you" poems, and

Footnotes

130 Statement from *The Elaboration*, p. 29.

the rest of the volume's thirty-eight pieces using more "public" structures, mostly of the geography master variety. In *Good Looks* (1982), however, we see a radical demographic reversal. Of that volume's thirty-seven poems, five at the most bear any strong resemblance to that intimate "third-person you" formation, and in every case that arrangement seems more than usually fragile. Filling the space vacated by this structure, I count seven poems where the "I" wears some overt kind of mask, and at least eight suggestive of that introspective "first-person you". The remaining poems use the geography master shape or a variety of other less private shapes (evident especially in the poems addressed to children). Of course one might quibble about particular examples but to me the trend is unequivocal and is neatly confirmed by that more recent work which occupies the tail-end of *Zoetropes*(1984).

The orientation of Manhire's pronouns, then, evolves through precisely those forms we have traced in Edmond and Wedde. However, what makes Manhire's story different is that when, in *Good Looks*, he abandons that "third-person you", instead of becoming nervous, evasive, defensive, he actually seems to become more direct, more expansive. On the other hand, as many of his poems begin to take on a more explicit narrative structure, it becomes increasingly obvious just how much he holds in common with those other poets. In particular, while it has always been apparent that (at least, after language) the personal relationship is his first concern, only in *Good Looks* does it really become clear just how preoccupied he is with family. In fact he ranges over the topic more widely than Wedde, or than Edmond prior to *Letters and*

Paragraphs, firstly because he is more concerned than they with looking back at parents at the same time as he is looking forward at children, and secondly because his vision seems able to encompass a darker and more brutal view of family relations.

Good Looks, as even the jacket notes have fathomed, is a book deeply troubled by the death of a father. A father-figure has always been important in Manhire. In *The Elaboration*, there is "A Death in the Family", as well as a poem called "The Spell" which alludes with notable precision to Roethke, a poet famously haunted by his father.[131] Parents are important in the second book too, where one could start by looking at an unhappy poem called "Clouds". What "father" means to Manhire is never made explicit, but the associations tend to be troubled. "An Outline", from *Good Looks*, begins with the disowning of parents.[132] In "Loosening Up Poem" the relationship is rendered highly metaphorical, but its general import seems to be corrosive ("The ocean / spray between coast / & grandfather, between father / & son....") and though this spray is said not to "stain anything very / much" this sounds like Manhire's own variety of false courage, linked as it is to proverbially unlikely events and to the drying up of creativity ("if the pen / still goes on running out of ink / you know you've seen it / all before....").[133] One might claim, on the contrary, that that stain is very visible in Manhire's work. If we take "Good Looks" itself and slip the figure of a dead father into that "you" ("We talk and talk till silence

Footnotes

131 Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz", see *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973) p. 755.
132 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 67.
133 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 36.

interrupts. / Oh, distance won't harm you, / it's where you belong...."), then the poem evokes an authority structure that will continue to be troublesome, and difficult to interrupt: "Why do I think you still know better / though I know you are wrong?"[134]

Though it runs through the poems like a refrain, the relationship of the son to the father is approached only glancingly. The relationship of parent to child, however, is dealt with in a much more direct way. Manhire dwells at some length in *Good Looks* on the price the adult pays for being a parent:

> Do you still remember the future?
> How it made a lot of noise for instance?
> There was a caravan, everyone was travelling.
> There were conversations, now ancient history,
> in which we hurled the family
> from hand to hand and all set out:
> or I believe we meant to.
> ....
> Now
> the words are largely lost in song, and song is lost
> inside the children. We sometimes hear the voices still,
> a catch of absence when we sit at table,
> crossing that sea on which the facts alone set sail.[135]

> When once that baby grows, we said,
>
> and put away the car....
>
> Now, too, there were provisions, jars of preserves
> against the future, photographs to remind
> that nothing entered the picture
> save cats and children....[136]

These two very similar excerpts illustrate just how plainly

Manhire writes at times in *Good Looks*, especially in these past

Footnotes

134 Manhire, *Good Looks*, 16.
135 Manhire, "The Caravan", *Good Looks*, p. 46.
136 Manhire, "An Outline", *Good Looks*, pp. 67-68.

tense narrative poems and in the poems from the book's fourth section addressed to children. They also illustrate a willingness to recognise the banal and ugly truth that there is a price to be paid for parenthood in terms of options and access to certain kinds of stimulation ("nothing entered the picture" etc). Elsewhere, as in the well-known "Children", or in "Last things", Manhire writes about parenthood with charm and tenderness. This darker angle seems worth stressing, however, for the perspective it casts on Wedde and Edmond and their insistently affirmative approach to the implications of parenthood.

One of the poems from that fourth section of *Good Looks* ends with these three interesting stanzas:

> Oh who am I talking to?
> That is, to whom am I talking?
> Oh, not to you
>
> And not to you:
> The longest poem in the Southern Hemisphere
> Alas is not for every eye
>
> Subsequent sections
> Shall go directly
> To Vanessa, by and by[137]

It is tempting to infer that those two object pronouns to whom the speaker is *not* talking are the "second-person you" and the "first-person you", the general public and the speaker himself; that auto-referential "you" would be included because of that flexible way in which it can expand and drag in an audience, violating the poem's confidentiality. The practice of making private words public is to be discontinued: private words

Footnotes

137 Manhire, "Poem for Vanessa", *Good Looks*, pp. 59-60.

addressed to "Vanessa" will remain private. In fact, Manhire has not been using that "third-person you" in the children-oriented poems anyway; perhaps in an elliptical way, however, he is acknowledging here a problematic which informs this book as surely as it informs *Castaly* or *Letters and Paragraphs*.

For if Manhire has never had to contend with the embarrassment of having a realist epistemology collapse on him, we can observe nonetheless his progression through the same exhaustion and eventual repudiation of that intimate "I"-"you" pronoun structure. However, although that structure predominates throughout his first two published volumes, Manhire's alertness to language and its fictive, imperialistic behaviour has seen that arrangement in trouble from its very inception:

> Since I need something else,
> a machine with gold stars
> in it, an ocean tossing with
> fish, I hold you in my arms.[138]

"You" will never find its way into the speech of the subject in its own right; "you" appears only as the displacement of a hunger, fabricated in answer to that hunger, standing in for its real, unimaginable object.[139] If, staying with *How to take*

Footnotes

138 Manhire, "In the Tent, Elche", *The Elaboration*, p. 20.

139 In *The Mountain Kiwi*, one of the epigraphs from *How to take off your clothes*, Mr Explorer Douglas explains that he ate the only two specimens of this bird which he ever encountered: "It is all very well for science, lifting up its hands in horror, at what I once heard called gluttony, but let science tramp through the Westland bush or swamps, for two or three days without food, *and find out what hunger is*." (p. 27, my italics) Also cf. "The Voyeur: An Imitation": "... the form of what was loved / remains, a passive thing demanding to be cherished" (*Good Looks*, p. 42).

off your clothes, we pursue the less obvious syntactical possibility in "I don't know you, yawn in the heart",[140] that "you" becomes a gap, a resident appetite, the projection of an oedipal motor-reflex. An insatiable desire for "something else" opens up a category into which, inevitably, "you" will find itself slotted:

> My father is dreaming of
> a white mistress. That is
> his joke, he is utterly
> deluded, but you fit the bill.
>
> My mother is looking for
> the arrival of Christ. She needs
> only a small opportunity,
> only no one will provide it.[141]

Here the embrace of "I" and "you" is reduced to the embrace of the subject's desire to embrace.

There is never any question, then, of the lover's appearing in her own shape:

> Later you bring on all your
> effects: & in the garden we discover
> the skating-rink, women ticking
> with white frost, as if they
> mean to go off. A farmer from
> Balclutha sends a platoon of sheep
>
> out on to the ice. In their little
> boots they are quite graceful.
> They surround three women &
> shepherd them in for inspection.
> You sail out from me, shaking
> ice from your shoulders.[142]

Footnotes

140 Manhire, "The incision", *How to take off your clothes*, p. 11.

141 Manhire, "The collection", *How to take off your clothes*, p. 15.

142 Manhire, "The collection", *How to take off your clothes*, p. 14.

The epigraph to this section of the volume attributes to poetry, in suitably arcane fashion, an ambition of scrambling cause and effect.[143] Certainly that is what happens here. These "effects" are of course really *mine*, as the pronoun shift from "you" to "we" reminds us; as in Edmond's "Psyche", these effects are simply the figures by which "you" is displaced as the subject goes about fabricating its object. Manhire's comic imagery explores and exposes the imperialism of metaphor: sheep become soldiers and even shepherds, women become sexual time-bombs. "You", translated into my metaphors, emanates ("sails out") from me. And in the same moment, of course, you elude me, shaking me off with a shrug of the cold shoulder, leaving me with no more than a smattering of language.[144]

The Manhire we meet in *Good Looks* responds to these exigencies on a number of fronts. Firstly, as I have already mentioned, there is a proliferation of poems in which "I" is given a mask to wear. Plainly this is not to say that we should read the "I" of those earlier poems as designating the man who wrote them, as being other than masks, but simply that in these latter poems the poet emphatically *points* to that mask. And the nature of these particular poems suggests that the mask may have something to do with the poet's desire to distance himself from the predatoriness of that governing "I". There is that comic-phallic throwaway, "The Anglo-Saxon Onion", and another Old English poem, "Wen", which is basically a stream of invective. "Vidyapati's Song" is a dominance poem of another order, literalising the metaphorical sadism always

Footnotes

143 *How to take off your clothes*, p. 9.

144 cf. "The collection", *How to take off your clothes*, p. 15.

latent in the bearing down of subject on object:

> My lover's limbs are placed
> as ornaments.
> My lover's ornaments are eyes.
>
> ....
>
> My lover's breasts are marked
> with nails. Ah, see,
> her single garment is the rain.[145]

Then there is "The Voyeur: An Imitation", a poem focussed, as its title suggests, on that same relationship between subject and passive object. An "I", perhaps a poet-figure, styled as a kind of obsequious pimp, addresses a "you" (the reader?) to whom he refers mockingly as "sahib". The site where their attention converges, and converges with ours as we read the poem, is the diminutive "late Victorian girl", the textual object, "quite flat upon the paper".[146] Apparently, our guide/poet/pimp is tempted to abandon his traffic, but will not:

> And we should put the book down now and just return it
> to the shelf and then that way at least
> be done with it. But that would be too much like
> putting down the ancient family pet, not possible,
> even if the mind is gone, the form of what was loved
> remains, a passive thing demanding to be cherished.
> Also, we have not finished reading. We learned our early
> slow advances out of books, getting the answers
> off by heart before we knew the questions.[147]

There then follows the passage I quoted earlier (p. 124), where objects multiply as they move towards us through language,

Footnotes

145 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 146.
146 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 42.
147 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 42.

rendering ironic the invitation with which this difficult poem concludes:

> And we can put this pleasant evening down
> entirely to experience, whether or not we find
> the girl agreeable, whether we choose to make
> advances now or climb back through the
> window, postponing the moment once again,
> whatever it is we go on imitating.[148]

What we go on "imitating", I presume, is language -- firstly in the sense that the poem itself imitates the relationship between subject, reader and textual object (that structure we have seen cast the reader as voyeur), and secondly in the sense in which we learn our "advances out of books", putting down the figurative construct to "experience" and allowing it to inform our behaviour, our lives imitating art.

The next poem is named for "The Late Victorian Girl" herself, and seems to show this latter process enacted:

> A friend thinks he knows best
> and says only because you love him.
> And because you make a point of entry
> he is grateful and knows where he is
> and will do without the usual summary
> of facts.[149]

The "you" appears to have been confused by the "friend" with an image, mistaken for "the late Victorian girl" incarnate. Displaced by this fiction, she becomes redundant; she is simply a fetish, a point of sexual entry, an object which will "fit the bill". Accordingly, the poem concludes by expressly eradicating "you" from it:

Footnotes

148 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 43.
149 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p. 44.

...here
he already knows there is nothing: not the light
of the moon or the light of the stars disappearing,
none of the things he still believes

are needed, not even you.[150]

Though it harbours a malign intent towards that structure, and complicated though it is by that conflation of "here" (as opposed to there") and "he",[151] "The Late Victorian Girl" is one of the very few *Good Looks* poems still addressed, at least implicitly, to a "third-person you".[152] There is, however, in "The Afterlife", one poem which does lean heavily on that pronominal formation. And it "leans" on it in more ways than one, for this is also the poem in which Manhire most conclusively repudiates that arrangement, and talking about these stanzas now I suspect I will simply repeat myself -- it feels, that is, as if I have already spent the length of this discussion of the Seventies trying to explicate them:

The Afterlife

Enormous purple dawns, the water
was always rising, was always
soft and optional and always soft
to enter. I suppose therefore
we entered, believing those dawns
would hardly happen often, not
wanting to let our lives make do.

Footnotes

150 Manhire, *Good Looks*, p.44.

151 The status of this "friend" is of course highly ambiguous: are we being invited to call to mind that old routine involving the person who goes to the doctor/psychiatrist/sex therapist and says, "I have this friend who has a problem...."?

152 Others might include "Good Looks", "The Caravan", "Party Going".

Of course the world stood still
and all the stars popped out
like baby lightbulbs. Of course
the moon would usually come out
and thus improve the view.
Tell everyone, we said. Sometimes
at night I turned to you,

we turned the page, and there was
the yellow forest once again, the corridors
of yellow trees, the bright birds
roaming down. They tossed their frozen
rags towards the sky and still
got stuck in the marmalade, still found
they made the usual passage

from aspiration to regret.
Their feathers floated down
all over town. Indeed the afterlife
was all blue sky
with sometimes enormous purple
mornings. The flowers and clouds
which always seemed to sweep

the afternoons were merely
part of the local colour, as also
were the poets, who worked so hard
to scribble down their presence,
who set a furious pace
between the sheets
and wrote their dirty books

to read aloud and grew upset
when no one listened. We
didn't regret regret. We didn't
regret a life of pointless aspiration.
We wrote each other letters
and found our language suffering
from deep concussion

in its deepest structures. Love
was detained by loveliness we thought
like sticky jam, like some accomplishment
we somehow spent our feelings
getting to. Nothing got said.
It was a world of silent pictures,
damp and magical. It was

between you and me and not
between those fixtures. I wanted to write
straight home for instance
and make the big announcement.
You wanted me, I wanted you.
I never wrote the letter.
Each time I tried, the syntax

seemed to rot and leave
a few choice phrases underlined.
And then I supposed no words would do.
There was nothing I thought to say
that sounded true, nothing at least
to write straight home about,
no one at home to write home to.[153]

The first thing we notice about the Afterlife of the title is that it always inhabits the past tense. It seems to have been a paradisal condition, evoked in vivid, hallucinatory hues, and associated with a youthful idealism ("not / wanting to let our lives make do") and with a sense of self-possession and conviction. "Tell everyone, we said", may remind us of the retailers on Wedde's late lamented Real St ("you / could ask their advice"); it seems to have been a time when you could trust your own constructs, and the title may even contain a realist pun, as in "life drawing". But this is a post-lapsarian poem. When "I" and "you" (in line 14) are first distinguished from that general "we", they share a state of child-like harmony. By the beginning of the fourth stanza, however, the disintegration of the Afterlife has already been anticipated. The weariness which is conjured by "the usual passage / from aspiration to regret" is reminiscent of those other past-tense narrative poems which reflect in distinctly jaded tones on parenthood and the lives of families. The protagonist of "The Caravan", for example, could fairly be described as "stuck in the marmalade" -- that is, if we care to associate that image with those family breakfasts which feature so often in this book.[154]

Footnotes

153 Manhire, *Good Looks*, pp. 49-51.

154 For example, see "The Breakfast Session", "Breakfast", "Poem for Vanessa".

But increasingly as the poem progresses and becomes more urgent, ruined aspiration is associated specifically with language. We desire, and fail, to make our words arrest and realise our longings: "Love / was detained by loveliness we thought /... /.... Nothing got said." We desire to reach out and embrace one another but then cannot disentangle that embrace from "those fixtures" -- we find, in the first instance, our hungers soured progressively by the corrosive insistence of fixtures familial and institutional, and we find them, still more desperately, to be congenitally soured by the fixtures that inhabit our speech. "You wanted me, I wanted you": that modest, inalienable Seventies cogito, that "big announcement", that indelible embrace, turns out to be the invention of a sign system structurally concussed and corrupt, whose syntax falls away to leave a few choice phrases italicised like the imperatives of those long-disowned parents who always used to say *after*.[155] So finally no words will do, the letter will never be written: because, inexorably, the structure of the sentence and the agendas of the libido reduce the lover to a reflex, that big announcement which we wanted to make will always collapse into its own congratulation of itself. Incarcerated in its own authority, the subject is left desiring its own fictions. You are just a place at the end of my sentence: behind that pronoun I discover there is no one home.

Footnotes

155 Manhire, "An Outline", *Good Looks*, p. 67.

CHAPTER 3

WILY TE TUTUA'S OUTLAW GAMBOL

...the experience of each age requires a new confession.

Emerson, *The Poet*

i) *The appeal to language*

The magazine *And*, in its strategic four issues, subjected the local literary scene to the most dramatic piece of entrepreneurism it had witnessed since the advent of *Freed*. Co-editor[1] Leigh Davis's own assessment of its impact seems not to be unduly immodest: "*And* began at a time when you had to argue for the use of theory in NZ literature and it's finishing at a time when you have to argue the opposite....".[2] Already a discourse which is recognisably "post-*And*" has been seen to leave its mark on the later Wedde and Edmond. Even this thesis, for all its *ad hoc* methodology, advertises its provenance in a local climate unrecognisable as recently as 1982. It is a climate, that is, which encourages us to ask how it is that subjects get assembled on the page, and to be on the lookout for those evasions and blindnesses facilitating each successive announcement that *this time* someone is really on to something.

If these are the questions I now mean to ask of *And*, or more specifically of Davis himself, then already I find myself faced with objections. Why do I say Davis, or even *And*, when surely I am talking about the impact of what we might crudely call poststructuralism itself? I have spoken already of entrepreneurism, and the metaphor was not enlisted carelessly; as Davis himself has pointed out, "the change is not solely due

Footnotes

1 The first two issues were edited by Leigh Davis and Alex Calder; for the third and fourth they were joined by Roger Horrocks. *And* 1 appeared in 1983, *And* 4 in 1985.

2 Davis, interviewed by Hugh Lauder, *Landfall* 155, p. 310.

to *And*; it's just that it carries an idea whose time was due", and elsewhere, somewhat disingenuously perhaps, "it is now not realistic to expect the emergence of new pivotal commentators on the literature".[3] So why am I starting to talk about Davis as if he were just such a pivotal commentator? One thing this chapter will offer, I hope, is a satisfactory answer to that particular question.

We have observed how Baxter, and then the poets of the early Seventies, attempt to fortify their work (against that concentration of anxieties which I have labelled with the Wedde-derived rubric, "hieratic insecurity") each by positing a similar kind of stability. Hemi declares himself the slave of God, only to be betrayed by the interference of the medium out of which this god is constructed. Wedde and Edmond begin by trying to ground their inquiry in that indelible embrace of "I" and "you", a centre we have seen destabilised by the persistence of the fictive agency of language and of the authority which inheres in the subject position. In either case, then, a foregrounded first person pronoun claims access to a stable "real"; in the argot of Davis and his fellow travellers, we have been offered a *subject-centred* poetics, a poetics that founders as that sign system whose constitutive role has been repressed returns to expose the fictive and unstable nature of that necessarily authoritarian subject.

Davis responds to these responses of his precursors by proposing a shift in first principle more radical than that which differentiates the Seventies from Baxter. His ostensible ambition is to vacate the subject position entirely, to instate

Footnotes

3 Davis, interview by Lauder, p. 310; Davis, "Set Up", *And* 1, p. 6.

a poetics which is *language-centred*: promoted to the status of first principle, it is as if the sign system itself could be persuaded to author the text. Barthes's famous essay, "The Death of the Author",[4] outlines a strategy for reading by means of which criticism might wrest the text away from the hermeneutic custody of the putative parent. A poetics centred in language attempts to literalise this custodial displacement in the context of writing's very production: the author's death is presumed, that is, not just in the reading of texts, but also in the act of composing them.

Back we come, then, to the poet as pivot, and to the enabling assumptions of Davis's language-centredness. In appointing language to rule over his project, he concedes that his meanings are ineluctably textile and therefore, unlike those of his predecessors, invulnerable to destabilisation by the fictiveness of language. But language is his fetish, not his problem. His problem, that embarrassment he needs to efface, is the agency of the writing subject, and it is in the form of that authoritarian "I" that the repressed returns to trouble him. A subject-centred poetics attempts to collapse the distance between the subject of the enunciating and the subject of the enunciation; it treats this undifferentiated subject as a stable entity capable of bearing witness, and erects around it a first-person heroics. Davis rejects that subject posture because it fails to recognise its own fictitiousness: like that "now historic male ego" which he likes to talk about,[5] it is oblivious of its own constitution

Footnotes

4 *Image - Music - Text*, pp. 142-148.

5 See "Public Policy", *And* 4, p. 83; Lauder interview, p. 312.

in the distribution of authority. So why, then, are we talking about "Davis"? How has this Dead Author become so reified? The simplest answer is that Davis is unable to eradicate the image of the subject of the enunciating. He still wants to draw a line round the landscape and drive a stake in it labelled DAVIS. He still wants to tell us to open our atlas and attend to his new metropolitan geography. I will argue, then, in the course of this chapter, that this "language" which Davis wishes to promote to a position of ultimate responsibility for his project, conceals, like a priest-hole, yet one more version of the poet as his own hero.

ii) *Holy sonnets*

The erection of an Eighties poetics involves Davis in an aggressive and systematic campaign of "bouncing off practices one doesn't respect".[6] By way of introducing his project, then, I would like to follow him on this "journey among the heroes" (2),[7] and look at some of the ways in which he responds to Curnow, Baxter and Wedde. As well as helping to sketch in his poetic imperatives, this will lead us into a more

Footnotes

6 Davis, "Set Up", p. 1.

7 Throughout this chapter numbers in brackets refer to my own numbering of the 97 poems in Leigh Davis, *Willy's Gazette* (Wellington: Jack Books, 1983). It is important to note that Davis does not number the poems himself; the reasons for this are best explained in his review article on Roger Horrocks's *The Auckland Regional Transit Poetry Line*: "In *Poetry Line*, line is not 'routine'. The form of the daily records is kept provisional. They have all the form they can use, can be read in any order, with no page numbers." ("Roger's Thesaurus", *And* 2, p. 59.)

specialised discussion of the techniques Davis, as critic, uses to try to efface his own subjective agency. This in turn will establish a base from which we can examine the heroism proffered in Davis's large first poetry book, *Willy's Gazette*.[8] Curnow, the object of Davis's scrutiny in his weighty M.A. thesis,[9] earns that attention by virtue of his status as "a synechdoche almost"[10] for that local realism which, as the discourse of the literary centre, represents his natural enemy. There and in a subsequent essay, and aided and abetted by Roger Horrocks in a series of crisp and lucid articles, Davis "cuts him free of the real", interposing the characteristic features of a Curnow "genre".[11] For brevity's sake, let me change tack here and re-quote these three lines from *Willy's Gazette*: "...Jerusalem / is a ghost settlement by a river, formed once / in a series of sonnets...." (2). I hope that this fragment, appearing at the head of my chapter on Baxter, makes sufficiently explicit the belatedness there of my own procedures in respect of these writers' critique of that Curnow-derived realism.

Meanwhile, the opening lines of that poem range somewhat

Footnotes

8 Obviously my investigation descends on Davis at a very early stage in his career, and I would do him a grave disservice to pretend to furnish him with "endpapers" (cf. "Set Up", p. 6). Those sparkling newer poems collected in Mark Williams's Caxton anthology, for example, suggest that he has travelled a long way since *Willy's Gazette* (*New Zealand Poetry 1972-86*, pp. 158-159; for other recent work, see my bibliography).

9 Leigh Davis, *Noyade: Genre in Allen Curnow 1935-1972* (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1980).

10 Davis, "Solo Curnow", *And* 3, p. 50.

11 Davis, "Solo Curnow" (that subsequent essay), p. 60. Of the many essays Horrocks has published recently, I am thinking in particular of "The Invention of New Zealand" (*And* 1, pp. 9-30), "No Theory Permitted On These Premises" (*And* 2, pp. 119-137), and "To Postulate A Ready And An Understanding Reader" (*And* 3, pp. 120-130).

more widely over Davis's quarrel with Curnow:

> The past was pointilliste and incidental -
> Mr Stevens and sunsets, historical,
> understood by landsats., critics, books from Lands & Survey
> (initially).... (2)

Veiled though Curnow's presence may be, the signals are still clear enough. Stevens, Curnow's primary mentor as his poetry becomes more introspective and epistemologically sophisticated, stands in here for his most eminent local adherent. Curnow can never satisfy Davis because, even when he is most explicitly *not* trying to write a "natural" poetry, he still won't relinquish that modernist nostalgia for what Stevens calls "The poem of pure reality".[12] Curnow's irony continues to be predicated on a "pervasive nature/culture antimony", and his work is seen to be infected (and again, perhaps he resembles Stevens in this) by "an essentially post-Christian sense of alienation".[13] Alienated from the real, that is, by the inadequacy of language as a means to represent it, Curnow still inclines, ironically but compulsively, towards it. He still wants language to front up to "history", to "incident", to things that really happen; he refuses to surrender finally to the play of signifiers. That is why maps ("landsats", "books from Lands & Survey") inevitably attract Davis's scorn: they pretend to give expression to a literal, one-to-one correspondence between signs and things. One of Davis's poems is a photocopied weathermap, bearing the title "Diary of a Country Priest". The nationalist hierophant (a.k.a. the

Footnotes

12 Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven", *Selected Poems*, p. 134.
13 Davis, "Solo Curnow", p.. 59, 61.

geography master) would steer his congregation towards a kind of literalism which to Davis is automatically suspect -- as must be any presumption of authority by a weatherman who wants to try to tell us which way the wind blows.

With reference still to those opening lines, we should note that this movement, whereby the past detaches itself from and helps to define Davis's implicit *now*, is one he rehearses frequently. Pointillism, with its connotations of "local colour" and of a laboured and quaintly circuitous way of using a medium to produce visual images, opens on to one of Davis's pet aversions in the form of imagism. "...I wanted to get the 'literary', as a concept, robust again. Some image-train poems seems rather thin....", he records in his prefatory Note to *Willy's Gazette*.[14] It is not hard to see what he is getting at. The reign of *Pound's* "Dont's" and "The red wheelbarrow", with that relentless privileging of the visual, the domestic, and the quasi-vernacular, has at length produced a reductive template: folksy, flat and faintly hostile to intellection. Most importantly from Davis's point of view, this essentialist poetics -- predicated as it is on the assumption of a one-to-one relation between words and things -- is guilty of under-utilising language. Accordingly, he wants to mobilise against it an emphatic and joyous over-determination, a discourse which, rather than trying to penetrate its object, deepening in the direction of the real, expands instead along a verbal axis, aggregating its richness along the signifying chain.[15] The promiscuity of even the most

Footnotes

14 Davis, "Note", *Willy's Gazette* (unpaged).

15 In "Public Policy" Davis pursues an analogy between "language poetry" and Cubism; in this sense Cubism is the antithesis of pointillism (p. 83).

innocent-looking signifiers is illustrated ironically by "Lands & Survey / (initially)": Lands and Survey maps may represent the acme of literalism, but those initials, "L" and "S", escape to become characters in their own right elsewhere in the sequence.[16] Or we can represent the shape of that expansion simply by visualising an annotated copy *of Willy's Gazette*: columns of complex information stack up as the reader tries to tabulate a plethora of puns, allusions, cross-hatchings, all manner of jostle among the signifiers, just as this paragraph continues to accumulate on top of that one word, "pointilliste".

"[I]ncidental", for its part, evokes a second ill in the form of narrative. A narrative poetics, a poetics of what Davis calls (in another context) "the look-what-happened-to-me",[17] is hostile to language maximisation because it generates a deepening in the subject position. As we have seen, the subject takes on coherence and density as a sequence of congruent events transfix it, while in order to promote this organising subject language has to be watered down. To that poetics of Davis's *now*, on the other hand, a poetics which wants its language to clot, such incident is quite simply "incidental" -- ephemeral in relation to configurations of signs.

When Davis turns his attention to Baxter, we meet this same arrangement of *then* and *now*, and this same expansion on a textile axis:

Footnotes

16 Davis, *Willy's Gazette* 12, 15, 17, 22, 31, 37, 78 etc. See also my p. 166.

17 "Cubism was not in any sense painting of the look-what-happened-to-me." Davis, "Public Policy", p. 83.

Here they come David, droning over the
ranges, pale red, beating up

in formation, seven to a group,
angels, their stiff little wings and spaces

between their wings, down from the escarpments,
such distant looming chanters it's a long

coast..such calm remembering men,
silent, many previous, redoubtable

here they come David, uncommon,
metrical, their small primitive radios..

pick them out (on such a wide day)
their strange coherent insignia steady,

resounding, speaking air craft that's the way
it goes..(few are standing by.) (60)

These angels, or bi-planes, seven to a group, travesty the shape of the Baxter sonnet.[18] To be fair, though, the target is less Baxter himself than his legacy, a torrent of imitation Baxterism inundating the hapless "David" [Dowling, editor of *Landfall*?].[19] The post-Baxter poem is portentous and Olympian ("down from the escarpments, / such distant looming chanters"), and may tend towards a Forties-style social and geographical embattlement ("it's a long coast" i.e. to be *defended*). It is also boring and retrogressive ("droning", "primitive"), an assertion which, at a glance, may seem to become rather repetitive in Davis's poem; it takes on more subtlety, however, as soon as one acknowledges the (negative) importance he places on a poem's being "recognizable"[20] -- of its partaking in a genre. This is one sense underlying "many previous" and "strange coherent insignia steady" (Stead-

Footnotes

18 cf. Ian Sharp, review of *Willy's Gazette*, *Landfall* 155, p. 381.

19 This section of the book is titled "The Magazines". "David" also corresponds to Baxter's "Colin".

20 For example, see the Lauder interview, p. 312.

like?). The irony animating the latter image derives from the inability of this Baxterism to recognise its own integral strangeness and coherence: what it mistakes for a "natural" poetry is in fact a convention, its gestures sanctioned by habit to the point where they calcify into insignia; what it mistakes for profundity ("resounding") is no more than the rehearsal ("re-sounding") of generic ritual. And if the necessary foundation of a "natural" poetics is that familiar epistemological naivety, this is buttressed firstly by the capacity of "craft" to erase the evidence of its construction, and by the privileging of voice ("speaking air") with its assumptions of a unitary subject -- all of which engenders that reflective Wordsworthian ("such calm remembering men") complacency. Already, however, as the gloss starts to stack up once more, we can see how this "calmness" falls casualty to (is made "re-doubtable" by) the implicit present and the "few" who "are standing by".

Baxter, though, figures in Davis's pantheon less as an under-exploiter of language than as an example of that corresponding, unhealthy deepening at the subject position:

> You're a big ghost, Jim St. John,
> nice sheen on your forehead and noseridge's catchy,
> spread over the billboard, nine years later..
> I was in the mind for Jerusalem, but early Willy's like
> a 1972 *Listener*. Barefoot for forty miles in the rain,
> kenosis, (who were you reading?)..
> Then our literati were known for their sandals,
> their misery..& talent, leisure, demography,
> capital, markets, blew old icons up
> into large collected poems, where the audience knew
> the hagiography.... (3)

A language-centred poetry needs to be purged of this reification of the author-as-hero; language itself is where

meanings happen, and it is only a weary romanticism that wants to pre-empt it by promoting the image of a telescoped enunciating/enunciated subject. Baxter, then, is seen as the embodiment of a poetics of "the suffering self". Davis works this notion through in conversation with Alan Loney, where by vigorously leading his witness he attempts (unsuccessfully) to induce a repudiation of Baxter and a recognition of "The need to change the heroism".[21] The interesting question which this opens up concerns "change" as opposed to *abolition*. "Then our literati were known for their sandals, / their misery....": again that *then* implies a *now*. Is the reification of the author to be relinquished, or is it merely to suffer a change of style? Will eradicating angst-ridden messianics eradicate the governing subjectivity of the author, or will it merely usher out an old regime and afford a new heroism possession of the stage? Plainly this matter has grave implications for the radicalism of Davis's programme.

In casting his book in the form of a sonnet sequence, Davis inserts himself, consciously and aggressively, in a tradition running back through *Earthly* (and Stead's sonnets) to the Jerusalem Baxter.[22] A "bouncing off practices one doesn't respect" -- an habitual definition of *now* against *then* -- is embedded in the project's very form: it is, after all, the heroism of Baxter and Wedde (along with Curnow's) that Davis most wishes to discredit. Davis wants to purge his own poems, both of the machoism of the (delusively) unitary

Footnotes

21 "Talking with Alan Loney: Wednesday 31.8.83", *And* 1, p. 51; see also p. 44.

22 C.K. Stead, *Walking Westward* (Auckland: The Shed, 1979), pp. 16-29. This lineage can be traced further back to Curnow's sonnets in *Sailing Or Drowning*; behind Curnow, once again, stands Auden.

subject, and of what Barthes calls "the greasiness of 'natural' language".[23] Assembled out of "healthy" signs,[24] pure of all intent to dominate or mystify, here is the promise of a squeaky clean discourse and sonnets holy as none before them.

What we see swimming to the surface of these texts, then -- that is, Davis's text and my own -- is a narrative which till now has remained more or less submerged. It is possible, as with any other literature which confers prestige on the individual author,[25] to represent the development of New Zealand poetry as a descending pattern of oedipal contest.[26] I have not tried to push this narrative forward as I have been trying to tease out patterns more local and particular -- the descent of certain preoccupations *inside* that ongoing oedipal drama -- but inevitably that drama breaks surface here because Davis pushes his struggle with his predecessors so far forward. That express determination "to get the 'literary', as a concept, robust again" produces, in the form of *Willy's Gazette*, and heftily buttressed by Davis's criticism, the most aggressively allusive poem in our literature. The possible exception of Curnow aside, none of our writers has been as vigorous or systematic in attempting to discredit the poetic assumptions s/he has been raised on. If that oedipal model holds, however, this effort will be directed first of all towards the dispossession of that parental authority. This must embarrass Davis's project, for what this oedipal contest

Footnotes

23 Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers", p. 199.

24 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 135.

25 cf. Barthes, "The Death of the Author", p. 143.

26 To borrow a phrase from Davis ("Solo Curnow, p. 50), Harold Bloom "walks around out back of" this thesis.

represents is the return of the repressed in the form of narrative and of the promotion and reification of the subject of the enunciating.

iii) *Working for the Law*

Davis's response to Roger Horrocks's *The Auckland Regional Transit Poetry Line* is an important part of his critical *oeuvre*: as his most extensive and affirmative comment on the work of a poet to whom he is sympathetic, it is revealing of precisely what he wishes to affirm. One thing that comes through prominently is the sense of Horrocks as what I will call, facetiously, a *meta-author*: that is, mysteriously, he seems to have found a way over to the far side of his own authority. Davis approaches Horrocks's long poem as if it were "immanent"[27] in language itself and could be realised without the intercession of an authorial sensibility:

> ... the narrative usually loops upon itself and moves laterally as the detail of a life is seen to cross-hatch, fetch in associations, interrogate itself in new ways....[28]

Somehow a life interrogates *itself*, with no need of an enunciating subject to ask the questions. To Baxter's "Rule over myself He has taken away from me", and Wedde's "more like listening than talking", it appears we can now add Davis on

Footnotes

27 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus". p. 27.
28 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 55.

Horrocks: "This ranging is not so much harnessed for tight artistic purposes as it is *followed*....".[29] Here "language" poetry detaches itself from a poetry centred in the heroic subject, substituting its own metaphysics. Baxter obeys God, Wedde listens to the personal, Horrocks follows language. But Davis's need to defend this assertion produces a suggestive brittleness of syntax. Horrocks's work "makes or draws sense";[30] which, though -- does it draw it, or *make* it? Again, it "does not master its material or rank it .... However, the writing does marshall [sic] various suggestive descriptions....".[31] While on the one hand, then, it is said not to "master" its material, this "writing" (i.e. the writing *subject*) still fathers, marshals, extends the long arm of the Law.

A self that presumes to organise language, rather than being organised by it, encapsulates all that Davis is most suspicious of: to invert what was earlier claimed for Baxter, Davis *mis*-trusts the authority of the self. However, if that self is to be erased it leaves behind it the troublesome question of how it is that language gets arranged on the page: in other words, who is navigating this craft? Davis wants to say in reply that language itself is at the controls. This is what is so damaging about the surfacing of that oedipal-contest narrative: it betrays the presence of a subject trying to constellate language in the service of its own libidinal ends. All of which produces interesting pressures, particularly in Davis's criticism. Because he must disclaim his own authority,

Footnotes

29 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 56.
30 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 52.
31 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 52.

we observe him repeatedly trying to appoint some substitute power to preside over his sentence.

Among this array of puppet rulers, he is particularly fond of *And* itself, as in "*And* finds its entry here".[32] This is a statement with which Davis is more comfortable than with, say, "Here is where I/we find a place to insert my/our magazine": the personification of the journal masks the insecurities of the first person singular. Sometimes the authority of the magazine will be enforced by the employment, in the same gesture, of literary theory itself: "*And* was aware there was a massive technology change which would enable it to re-enter the world of New Zealand literature."[33] Here Davis becomes less the aggressive entrepreneur, prosecuting his own oedipal coup, than the steward of an impersonal enterprise which precedes him: "...the change is not solely due to *And*; it's just that it carries an idea whose time was due".[34]

A related authority-evasion mechanism is that now well-familiar first person plural:

> ... of these three sets of clues we consider only instances where the emergence in *Georgicon* of signifiers used as toys accompanies an ambiguity in the roles of addresser and addressee, and leads to the detection of the Infant Boy....[35]

Like the "first person you", this Royal We is a device with which the subject of the enunciating tries to push away his/her own subjectivity; it appeals to the spurious authority of the collective, of myth, nature, popular wisdom.[36] It justifies its

Footnotes

32 Davis, "Set Up", p. 3.
33 Davis, Lauder interview, p. 310.
34 Davis, Lauder interview, p. 310.
35 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 93.

plurality as incorporating "I" the writer and "you" the reader: as we read this text together we become plural, thus neatly evading the fact that of course I am still reading the text to you and you must continue to play object to my enunciating. In Davis's hands, moreover, this collective suggests that he speaks on behalf of his co-editor(s) ("We have been interested in texts that move like well-understood vehicles...."[37]) and in doing so extends to the reader an invitation to consider him/herself an *And* "companionable": "And so we [the editors of *And*] bring disaster to the tired New Zealand literature that we [you and I, gentle reader] know....".[38]

The essay, "Public Policy", from which that remark about *Georgicon* is lifted, shows us Davis-the-critic's most dramatic attempt to efface that governing role of the subject of the enunciating. "*Georgicon*, a desire map, is *annexed* by Lacan":[39] thus Davis announces his enlistment of what he likes to call "Lacanian technology" as a front for his own imperialism, and specifically in this case his own oedipal antagonism towards Ian Wedde. However, neither the recruitment of this stalking horse, nor that resort to a plural subject pronoun, can conceal the marauding libido of the writing subject. As the most prominent figure of that generation now beginning to settle into the exercise of power, Wedde represents perhaps the largest single obstacle to Davis's "take-over"[40] of New Zealand literature. An assault has been clearly telegraphed as early as Davis's programme piece in *And*

Footnotes

36 I am indebted here to an observation made in conversation by Mark Williams.
37 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 82.
38 Davis, "Set Up", p. 7.
39 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 39.
40 Davis, Lauder interview, p. 317.

1;[41] again, it is advanced elliptically in *Willy's Gazette*, and more directly in an aggressive *New Zealand Times* review of *Tales of Gotham City*.[42] The *coup de grâce*, however, is saved for the end of the last of *And*'s four issues, where three consecutive articles, by three of the four critics most prominently associated with the magazine, tilt vigorously at Wedde's achievement.[43]

Not, of course, that "Public Policy" announces itself in these terms. The first half of the article looks retrospectively at the *And* interruption, thereby emplacing its reading of Wedde in the neutralising context of a more general dissatisfaction with "the standard discourse of New Zealand literary criticism";[44] what follows, we assume, will simply be an instructive example of non-obvious reading praxis. But that other vehemently personal agenda extrudes through the cracks of the metaphors and methodology.

Firstly, Davis's construction of Lacan is marked by the distinctive inflections of the "bush" lawyer. On the one hand, Davis invents his own psuedo-Lacanian terminology ("Infant Boy") which he then passes off as if it derived from the original Authority. At the same time, though, his Lacan is unsourced (except for a reference to Terry Eagleton),[45] and Davis's syntax becomes noticeably evasive in the course of

Footnotes

41 Davis, "Set Up", p. 4.

42 Leigh Davis, "Wedde out of fashion", *New Zealand Times*, 24/6/84. Perhaps the most interesting sentence in the review is the crafty "double negative" with which he concludes: "Less than anybody perhaps, he's not a guerilla in Havana getting weak".

43 "Public Policy"; Horrocks, "'"Natural" as only you can be'"; Wystan Curnow, "Speech Balloons & Conversation Bubbles", *And* 4, pp. 125-148. The "absent" fourth critic is Alex Calder.

44 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 87.

45 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 88.

certain crucial hermeneutic excursions:

> These are *susceptible to being read as* Return to Mother narratives, which are *usually marked by* signifiers of inexplicable violence, curious contest, nurture and libido images, and insideness. Mother *is inhered in* placenames and accounts by repetition and incantation.[46]

Then there is that range of obtuse reading gestures with which Davis manipulates Wedde into positions of weakness. For example, by making claims on Wedde's behalf that the latter would have no interest in, he is able to set up convenient straw targets, as in: "Wedde's *Georgicon* is 'open' poetry because it is set out that way".[47] He severs *Georgicon* from the rest of the Wedde corpus, reading him as might the proverbial Martian; he favours the word "unaccountably" in situations which are perfectly coherent to anyone familiar with Wedde's recurrent interests,[48] and he likes to announce interpretative discoveries as if we had his "Lacan" to thank for them when in fact they sit prominently in the foreground of Wedde's text much as they have since as far back as *Castaly*:

> He ["the Infant Boy"] talks courage to himself and rearranges that discourse so that it appears to include others. His protests of love are never unmixed. He struggles foxily to strike authentic notes.[49]

Of course I am not saying Davis is "wrong". *Georgicon* does conceal a Return to Mother narrative (a more interesting exercise might be to try to find a text which does *not*), and if

Footnotes

46 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 89, my italics.
47 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 89.
48 Davis, "Public Policy", see for example p. 48.
49 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 90.

at times the person-from-Mars ("non-obvious") reading merely re-discovers the obvious, it can be welcomed as often as it does succeed in teasing out a ("de-centred") text that eludes authorial intention. But in addition I think it is useful to listen to what that resort to Lacan-as-mask never quite muffles, and that is the intensely *personal* agenda at work here, both in the sense that the subject of the enunciating is so conspicuously visible, and in the sense that he smuggles in so much *ad hominem*.

The terms in which Davis describes his own strategies pull against one another in interesting ways. On the one hand he admits that his approach is violent and imperialistic, wilfully forcing itself on Wedde's text ("*Georgicon* ... is annexed by Lacan"); elsewhere, however, he refers to his technique as "recuperative", or as "a way of recovering basic constellations", both of which imply extant meaning structures which the critic is no more than explicating for us.[50] Or again, while Davis (to justify the flamboyance of his approach) insists on that enunciating/enunciated subject distinction, and that the text "puts the writer beyond reconstruction",[51] elsewhere he appears quite unconcerned to distinguish between "Wedde" and the textual subject.

This pincer movement sits intriguingly alongside a statement from earlier in the essay: "Beneath plain and obvious messages [*And*] discovered analysands".[52] If the text puts the writer beyond reconstruction, then this "analysand" must be strictly disembodied. Yet a few pages later Davis can observe:

Footnotes

50 Davis, "Public Policy", pp. 87, 88.
51 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 88.
52 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 87.

> These lines can be read again as a conflation or mingling of addresses between the Infant Boy and Mother, or Wedde and his partner.[53]

And again:

> "Her" clouds of sleep are said to burn off but she is not the subject who is quickening. The iconic journey from *out* to *in* (Wedde is in the process of walking inside; entry into her "dark house" is the object of attention) is aroused.[54]

Davis, it seems, is trying to shanghai that "Ian Wedde we know personally"[55] and smuggle him back into a reconstructed version of Wedde's text.

When first introducing the Lacanian model, Davis excoriates a kind of know-nothing response to psychoanalysis: "A theoretical discourse of non-obvious abstractions is immediately read as some kind of realistic account".[56] And yet his own (presumably feigned) carelessness around enunciating and enunciated subjects appears calculated to foster precisely this kind of literalisation. Davis is deliberately lazy about explaining the precise status of his "Infant Boy". Thus while the term might be readily defensible as an attempt to account for an interior subject born out of an infantile rejection drama, the signifier is encouraged to miscarry by virtue of what Davis so pointedly refrains from making clear: that this subject is ineluctably figurative; that while it inhabits the writer it is not to be confused with him; that while each of us

Footnotes

53 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 93.
54 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 94.
55 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 89.
56 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 89.

houses an infantile subject, it's nothing to get punitive about. By declining to defuse his "armature"[57] in this way Davis lets his metaphors become craftily penal: "the emergence ... of signifiers used as toys ... leads to the *detection* of the Infant Boy....". That home-made weapon (Infant Boy) is literalised into a kind of personal slander. From the cover of his Lacanian stalking horse there emerges once more the figure of the Marshal, bringing to justice an embodied subject and arraigning him on the strength of an imputed psycho-sexual recidivism.

To claim that same theoretical high ground which "Willy the outlaw" traverses in his "long ride" (64),[58] Davis needs to get outside that exercise of power to which the literary centre is habituated. Inevitably, however, the Law must co-opt him, as his hero Barthes explains so concisely:

> ...language is always a matter of force, to speak is to exercise a will for power; in the realm of speech there is no innocence, no safety.[59]

Innocence and safety evoke once more that long-serving hieratic insecurity. The return of a subject configured by narrative -- that subject which quarrels so irascibly with Wedde, inscribing the map of its own desire -- burns away the cover of the subject of the enunciating and contaminates the purity of its utterance with "I". Accordingly that pronoun returns once

Footnotes

57 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 88.

58 cf. Susan Sontag's remarks about "outlaw discourse" in Sontag ed., *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), p. xxx. Note also Davis's eagerness to arrogate the mana of "Punk and New Wave" (Lauder interview, p. 314).

59 Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers", p. 192.

more to its rightful place at the head of its own sentence: there it hands down penal speech, despoiling its innocence by the exercise of force.

iv) *Stepping out*

Having seen Davis striving so vigorously to define his project against the past, it comes as no surprise that the pronoun distribution in *Willy's Gazette* should evince a marked rejection of what we have seen from his recent predecessors. Indeed what we experience as we pick our way cautiously through that tricky pronominal thicket is a comprehensive assault on reading habits acquired through exposure to the poetics of the Seventies.

As we have noted, a subject-centred poetics nurses a congruency at the front end of the sentence; its subject pronoun adds up; narrative accrues, and psychology. Additionally, it tends to collapse that distance between the subject of the enunciating and the pronoun it enunciates; this latter, the subject on the page, begins to expand in the direction of the subject who authored it. Like narrative itself, this embodiment gambit privileges an "immanent" reality over a constructed one: language is the repressed of a subject-centred poetry, a poetry which under-uses language because it fails to recognise the depth of its implication in it. "Language" poetry inverts this arrangement and represses the enunciating subject itself, that subject which embarrasses this

poetry's claim to being centred in language and not in the individual. This explains why, in *Willy's Gazette*, and for the very first time on this pronominal tour, we find the favoured subject pronoun to be the third person singular: *he*.[60] This pronoun divorces, as emphatically as possible, the enunciated and enunciating subjects; it is calculated to erase from view the author and his subjective, authoritarian compulsions.

"Language" poetry, as Davis says of Horrocks's work, "is not ceremonious about an individual's pure or isolated perceptions from a more or less shored space".[61] As we may infer, though, the danger persists of that third person pronoun's becoming just such a space, taking on body and interiority,[62] and causing narrative to expand at the expense of the semiotic until the poem is re-centred in that enunciated subject; worse still, that pronoun may start to look like a simple projection of the subject of the enunciating, one more "impersonal way of talking about yourself" which confesses its intimacy with a ceremonious creator. Accordingly, Davis is at pains to ensure that his pronouns do not become remotely stable; in place of that older mathematical congruency, we encounter here a confusion and dispersal which never permits the identities of pronouns to set. The character known as Willy, for instance, does not invariably occupy the third

Footnotes

60 Edmond's "Hypochondria", in which we caught a glimpse of this pronoun, shows the influence, if not of Davis himself, then of theoretical perspectives which Davis has marketed.

61 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 49.

62 c.f. Barthes in the applicable context of his essay on Bunraku theatre: "work is substituted for interiority" ("Lesson in Writing", *Image - Music - Text*, p. 174).

person -- he can also appear as "I" or "you". Consequently, we may at times be tempted to think of Willy as a name by which the subject of the enunciating refers to himself ("it's me... / I'm Willy" [22]; or "I was in the mind for Jerusalem, but early Willy's like / a 1972 *Listener*" [3]); elsewhere, however, this identification is scrambled, by the playing off of Willy-as-subject against "me"-as-object (7), and by the way in which, for no apparent reason, inverted commas sprout around poems and then just as quickly and mysteriously vanish (15, 42), resulting in a kind of Chinese box effect (enunciations inside enunciations) which never permits us to say with confidence who is the signified of a particular pronoun.

Further, we are invited to contend with the flickering presence of a character called "L" (17, 78). It is almost as if, having established this unstable ambience, Davis wishes to tease us by provoking our vestigial appetite for biographism. If "L" suggests "Leigh", then "S" (Willy's partner figure) may suggest a person called Susan to whom the book is dedicated; suddenly, however, a character appears who is actually named "Susan", only to disappear just as swiftly. Why? Simply to keep us on our toes, and to remind us that "S" might equally stand for site ("she's a wonderful site" [57]) or for a purposively empty signifier; she is not, after all, a person, but a place in a sentence.

Amidst all this instability, then, Willy is offered as a kind of minimal shaping device, as if he were the least that his author could get away with:

> He's a figure of small actions, with his own repeated sites and iconography, who is (variously) composed, and

> haphazard. He is not a modern hero - flawed, compulsive, or American, but he does come and go, and he finds certain coordinates irresistable [sic] to sit in front of. He's lined up, like his writing, on small, coded, printed rails.[63]

Willy repudiates character psychology: he is not "compulsive", nor is he even "flawed". Indeed, as with "S", he is not a person in the first place; Davis mimics Braque: "ceci n'est pas un homme" (67). "[I]ncorp / -oreal -orating" (66), Willy te tutua is precisely *no body*; he is simply a space which aggregates language: "Ya! Willy Robusta, now present among you / covered with information...." (19). His lack of psychological presence is inseparable from his being made of text; Willy ("a pink, grey, thin, dreamt, paperman" [48]) is at once as deep and as shallow as the small printed rail of the line of type which constitutes him. This "thinness" integrates textuality -- an insistence on skating around among the signifiers, rather than trying to penetrate "the inward / part, or thing signified" (3) -- with the disavowal of angst-ridden interiority. That important pun "textile" comes in here also ("you find / him, so textile end on, flat as that...." [97]): like the text out of which they are fabricated, Willy's clothes have priority over his person:

> Blouse
>
> You blow there Willy..
> on that blond hill, sheets pegged in the seabreeze
> coloured or blank.... (1)

Far from pretending to go walking naked, Willy is unashamedly

Footnotes

63 Davis, "Note", *Willy's Gazette*, unpaged.

the sum of his embroideries.

But if Willy is what he is given to wear, it raises again the question of exactly who is responsible for outfitting him. To describe him as "(variously) composed, and haphazard" is to enmesh him in potent syntactical ambiguities. Are we to trust that comma: is he *alternately* composed and haphazard, or is he *always* haphazard and variously composed? If the way in which he is put together varies, then precisely what are the variables here? And if at various times he ceases to be composed, then when and by what agency? This syntactical opacity seems to advertise a certain nervousness on Davis's part about the respective contributions to Willy's composition of language, on the one hand, and of the subject of the enunciating, on the other. Similarly, he has "*his own* repeated sites and iconography", "*he finds* certain coordinates irresistable": how, precisely, does the subject of this enunciation perform these acts of discovery and possession? Or yet again, "He lies up against his project with intentions",[64] shouldering as he does so that originary desire which in the bad old days used to get attributed to the author.

Though already I hear my own syntax betraying a certain repetitiousness, I think we are obliged to pursue this matter if we are interested in seeing how far Davis is able to divorce himself from a subject-centred heroics. Let us return, then, to that "pointilliste and incidental" poem. Immediately after we left it last, it picks up Stevens's metaphor of the jar:

Footnotes

64 Davis, "Note", *Willy's Gazette*, unpaged.

> (from his vehicle Willy urgently looks about,
> feeling in this city of prominences
> a glass jar). In his *Progress* Bunyan made Jerusalem
> from glass and sunsets (this affects Willy)
> distant and refracting, while the close Jerusalem
> is a ghost settlement by a river, formed once
> in a series of sonnets.
> Willy too's being made, and made of silica:
> he fixes cunningly the orbit of his footsteps,
> recreates his journey among the heroes. (2)

Some of this is familiar already (the textile Jerusalem, the journey among the heroes) but let us turn our attention now to that "jar" and to Willy's cunning "orbit". Willy, like Stevens's jar on the hill (cf. "city of prominences"), takes dominion everywhere; around him language shapes up:

> Things in his magazine form shiny objects,
> Willis' symbols circle him,
> figuring a tabloid where time coheres
> as he assembles it, memories recur
> and keep their shape.... (8)

The troublesome thing about this orbital metaphor is that it constellates psychology, and even paranoia; Willy, remembering, threatens to accrue congruency. Perhaps this danger can account for that uneasy instability of mood. The Willy who "assembles" and "fixes" begins to configure a narrative heroism; accordingly, he needs to be made passive, to be smuggled out into the object position: "Willy too's being made", "Willis' symbols circle him". But this seems only to compound the problem, for symbols cannot circle of their own accord. Who, then, arranges this passive Willy, and who sets those symbols in motion around him? Turning back to Stevens, we recall that the jar imparts order to the "slovenly

wilderness" by virtue of the poet's having placed it there.[65]

Davis seems obliged to insist, however, that signifiers can carve out that shape unassisted:

> asdic is as common
> as breathing as inspiration
> the language administers and
> meters Willy's regimen it
> compiles.... (71)

As "Lacan annexes" Wedde, so here "language administers ... / ... *it* / compiles". But Davis's metaphor turns on him. "Asdic" (sonar) implies a transmitter, and the transmitter is none other than the subject of the enunciating, a subject which, bouncing its signal off the random chaos of the slovenly wilderness, measures distances from that centre, fashioning a subjective coherence:

> Willy's a rangefinder he's got special
> effects he's for the marxists a
> real estate when he conjectures
> it when he takes place for you
> lasting through all this sticking
> by well done reader! Willy's
> operatic about it he's possible
> elastic and feminine (incorp
> -oreal -orating) & linguistic
> sight like a dolphin turning
> upon the brown reef he drives
> out blind who's flank catches
> aqua beyond the beach a stream
> of blips erratic and frequent (66)

Willy is a rangefinder, that is, *for Davis* -- a "linguistic / sight" on the sonar screen of the subject who is steering this text. Earlier we meet him as a "marionette" (35), a puppet,

Footnotes

65 Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar", *Selected Poems*, p. 36.

theoretically, of that administering sign system. But language here governs only by virtue of an unstable coalition with an author, and in every gesture of Willy-as-puppet we see Davis-as-puppet-master pulling the strings.

This coalition metaphor will help us, I hope, to avoid reaffirming a simple intentionalism. Language must always wrest a text away from any intending subject: Davis, then, cannot control his own meanings, and it will not do to say that his writing is still subject-centred. But nor, however, is it centred in language. Davis's utterance, as surely as Baxter's, is language mobilised by an enunciating subject. A difference, perhaps, between Davis and Baxter, is that Davis is more aware of his inability ever to subdue his own constructs. However, Davis does not stop intending. His article on Roger Horrocks begins with an epigraph from Melville: "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method".[66] The essay may valorise Horrocks's "disorderliness", but what if we underline *careful* instead? Or again, consider this from "Public Policy": "...instead of ideas of argument forming a basic unity in the text, a piece of writing might *be constructed so as to make sense as* a collection of widely relating elements".[67] For all his intimations of a surrender to the signifier, and even though he may give language its head to a greater extent than any of his local precursors, at no stage does Davis relinquish his attachment to the idea of the author as the guiding intelligence of the text.

Despite all the cunning that went into his assembly, Willy remains Willy te tutua, the slave, and his master, Davis, can

Footnotes

66 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 49.

67 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 84, my italics.

no more hide behind language than Baxter can hide behind God. Willy, then, tells us as much about Davis as Hemi does about the author configuring him -- no more, certainly, but no less either. "Davis", like "Baxter", and like that "Horrocks" said by Davis to "reside among the connections of his work",[68] is a mythic subject built up as signs are deployed in its name -- the language of poetry and criticism, certainly, but formidably abetted too by what are sometimes thought of as less pure instruments of reification: biography, interviews, "photo opportunities". If the post-Lacanian subject is to be a textile entity built out of language, then the necessary correlative is that as often as we speak we constitute a speaking subject -- a different subject each time perhaps, but one that can be fictively unified under the rubric of a cumulative authorial signature. Every act of language transmission confirms and co-ordinates, however obliquely, a transmitter. Enslaved by the origin of speech in desire, it is more than we can do to stop our voices from congratulating us.

"That's me trying to step out of that sentence": to me Wedde's statement seems richly emblematic in that its irony captures that self-definitive, self-congratulatory ambition that the attempt to vacate the subject position must always harbour. "Personality", observes Harold Bloom, "cannot be voided except by personality".[69] The territory I claim in

Footnotes

68 Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 59.

69 Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 48. Similarly, Sontag observes of Barthes: "...this commitment to impersonality does not preclude the avowal of the self; it is only another variation on the project of self-examination" (*A Barthes Reader*, p. xxxiii.

the name of "Davis", Davis seems to be telling us, is a place where things are done in certain ways, and thus as surely as we can sketch in the moral scaffolding holding up the Baxter edifice, we can itemise a regimen of heroics by which that mythic site called "Davis" demands to be recognised.

Whatever else s/he may write about, every poet writes about the Myth of the Artist. I venture this resonantly vatic pronouncement because I believe it steers us towards a sense in which the rhetoric of postmodernism has not been understood with the reductive severity which its meta-authoritarian pretensions invite. Those who, like Davis, choose to slug it out in the frontlines of aesthetic rhetoric have used postmodernism's reading of conditions in an image-saturated, post-industrial environment to produce a prescription which is ineradicably mimetic: in a certain kind of climate, we are told, it behoves us to produce a certain kind of art. As always the demands of the age are novel, but the requirement that the producer of its artefacts respond appropriately to those demands is instantly "recognisable".

In *Willy's Gazette* we are offered what its author considers to be an intelligent and stylish response to his reading of the environment in which he understands himself to occur. That author and "Willy" are clearly not the same; Willy, however, is inserted into contexts, and his habits contrasted with certain retrogressive behaviours, in such a way as to privilege his style and valorise his well-acclimatised procedures. Consider, for example, those few lines I quoted from the volume's opening poem, "Blouse". As ever, Davis is bouncing off the past: against an inherited Rugged

Individualism, as typified, say, by Nigel Brown's images of Hemi/Baxter/Christ as black-singleted Man Alone, here he mobilises Willy the Blouse, androgynous dandy and wearer of "rose shirt[s]" (1). Which is not to say, of course, that *Davis* wears rose shirts -- merely that Willy reflects his taste to the extent that, in this specific context, that is how he chooses to dress his puppet. The gesture -- political, subjective, heroic -- nurtures the proverbial quiet revolution. Again, alert Willy knows himself as a citizen of the global village ("All day Boeings fly past the office, / and local knowledge, once, is knowledge of the streets of Ur." [25]), and having discovered that the world is neither flat nor stable, and that it is subject to being carved up by discourse, he (or better still that heraldic "we") respond[s] with a clear-eyed, Curnowesque fortitude:

> We editors and cartographers face that fact
> daily maps age post-modern printing isn't
> miraculous predictive of political outcomes
> borders stay where history last placed them
> Willy trails the train please
> accept this philosophically I know
> a thin king who does (54)

So this is how we do it: we face the facts, we keep wide awake in the thick of things,[70] we dress for the weather, we take risks,[71] we offer ourselves as editors of signs rather than miners of a haunted interiority. And this collective hands down a prescribed deportment, not just for the artist-as-editor, but also for the acclimatised reader: by keeping

Footnotes

70 cf. Roger Horrocks, *The Auckland Regional Transit Poetry Line* (Wellington: Hawk Press/Brick Row: 1982), unpaged.

71 cf. Davis, "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 54.

"sharp" and "*rightly / hesitant*" (49, my italics), s/he too may step into the semiotic breach.

Meet the new boss / Same as the old boss: such is the song of oedipal history, and so "ceremonious" is all this ascendant heroism that it comes as no surprise to discover that Willy the outlaw's state-of-the-art radicalism segues at times into something more overtly retrogressive. That thinness of which so much is made, for example, is suspiciously reminiscent of the garret-dweller's badge of authenticity:[72]

> after three foodless days you burn ketones..
> these days I look like an hawk,
> ....
> Hawk's gonna use a razor,
> get a face like a jet..
> He's gonna scrape through. (6)

Similarly, this ectomorph likes to bear witness ("these are / the currents the summer's political gestures "etc [47]), supplying what Loney calls "a continuum of noticing", an expression which -- strangely -- receives Davis's endorsement.[73] I say "strangely" because that continuum implies narrative, and hints at a shored subjective space in which the subject can cultivate this Wedde-ish "alertness". Again, we can point to the persistence in these poems of instances of that Seventies-style "I"-"you" intimacy. In a sonnet entitled "Moment of Purchase", for example, the syntax and pronouns offer more "resistance",[74] but that indelible instant is the same which offered a grip on the real to the

Footnotes

72 c.f. Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): "...to become thin is the naive act of the will to intelligence".

73 "Talking with Alan Loney", p. 42.

74 See n.89, p. 182.

earlier Wedde and Edmond:

> 7.Is there a track, a lattice, a sayle,
> a point d'appui? It was sky blue when S drove down
> the desert driveway, she's a wonderful site.
> 8.(W, turning around) Yes : pants, sox,
> knickers (our contract).
> 9.Bright boating (pass the oranges) ..young,
> still, and still smiling (I like your green cardigan). (57)

Clothing may now be evoked to stand in for bodies but, just as back in "Private Words", we see the world "contracting" to the embrace of "you" and "I". Here, as often when talking about a writer whose signifieds breed so profusely and subtly, I become nervous lest I credit him with too little irony; however, if he is mocking these routines, Lear-like he continues to cash in on them.

In his *And* 1 programme piece, Davis promotes what he calls a "horizontal" writing -- that is, to risk a slightly crude contraction, a writing which reflects "a change of attitude from a kind of bourgeois stance to one which is everywhere informed by the consciousness of historical and cultural factors".[75] For this horizontal writing, "the key interest is *not* how the mind arranges things or performs in any sense. Mind like that is not highly regarded and isn't dramatised".[76]

In at least two prominent ways, however, Davis's writing contravenes this agenda. Firstly, that is, it promotes systematically its own heroics of mind. Sonnets 51 and 52, the former being a "rough" draft of the latter, dramatise the evolution of a poem as it is pulled into shape by the authorial

Footnotes

75 Davis, "Set Up", p. 3.
76 Davis, "Set Up", p. 8.

consciousness and in so doing add yet one more dimension to the performance of a mind heroically attuned to the theoretical dispensation it inhabits. Likewise Don Willy Coyote, (73) rehearsing craftily his trick of standing upright in a world of fluid subjects ("being in manuscript / form" [49]) and hedonistic textile *jouissance*, demonstrates his master's mastery of the discursive environment into which he is projecting him:

> carrying his thoughts like a
> pubblicazione about unfurled but
> manifold as bonbons paper is bliss
> the way it curves back the magazine a
> strange warehouse behind enemy lines,
> these ideas.... (50)

To assert, then, as Roger Horrocks does of Davis, that "Less heroics leaves more room for play",[77] is to ignore that sense in which the repudiation of any particular heroics must in itself be an heroic gesture.

Secondly, we now need to consider that "consciousness of historical and cultural factors", a question pressured into prominence by this insertion of Willy "behind enemy lines". Who, precisely, is the enemy; what order of campaign is being waged here; how exactly does that campaign relate to that *soi-disant* awareness of history? That Davis is ill-equipped to deal with these questions proceeds from his failure to recognise the lineaments and implications of his own heroics, and their intimate, ineradicable relation to those "historical and cultural factors" which abut his campaign.

Footnotes

77 Horrocks, "To Posit A Ready And An Understanding Reader", p. 125.

v) *The uses of technology*

The "Interview-Debate" between Davis and Hugh Lauder is an interesting exercise in what political commentators refer to with phrases like "handling the media". As champion of a contestatory art, Lauder is eager to persuade his contestant to talk about "the world-view underlying the use of the new technology" and "your view of the relationship of art to society".[78] A jittery Davis, weaving and ducking, manages to keep his assailant at bay until help arrives finally in the form of a broken tape-recorder:

> At this point in the interview the not-so-new technology let us down and the rest of the interview went unrecorded. We talked about *Willy's Gazette* ... and also the relationship of post-structuralism, as represented by Leigh's work and *And*, to late capitalism....[79]

To misappropriate a phrase from Davis, the moment is rich in implications. From Lauder's Marxist-Protestant viewpoint it captures on tape the originary silence (formalist black hole) out of which Davis's project issues and into which it is inevitably reabsorbed.

Davis cannot talk about his relationship to late capitalism because the question embarrasses his enterprise too severely; his attempt to repress his own authority leaves him unable to deal with the reintroduction of the question of the

Footnotes

78 Lauder, interviewing Davis, p. 311.
79 Lauder, p. 319.

use and distribution of power. Pretending to surrender his authority to language, Davis dismisses our old-fashioned notions of what a socially ameliorative literature might look like: a "civic"[80] ideal of oppositional truth-telling has discredited itself through its bondage to an heroic subject. So when it becomes clear that all this time Davis-as-author has been carefully organising his own disorderly heroics, Lauder appears like the returning master, demanding to know to what end that authority has been directed.

Which is, I hope, a question we have answered already. Davis, too, practices a contestatory art; he departs from Lauder only in that he defines the arena of that contest so much more narrowly. That Davis sees literature as a combative occupation is apparent from the metaphors that literary theory and literary entrepreneurism excite him to:

> For that ["narrowly defined"] audience, little else is so tactical or offers such rewards. The design of *And* in this context is to contribute to various NZ literatures mild forms of sabotage and re-examination. Our audience is therefore factional in part, or is willing to think of factionalism as a positive. Reaction, bouncing off practices one doesn't respect, is also desirable.... For *And*, in this process (salvo, counter salvo, the sport of kings) timing is important - when to open and when to stop. [....] The prime requirement of such a magazine is that it be historically aware.[81]

This range of metaphors, competitive and military, and apparent playfulness notwithstanding, offers us a succinct explanation of what Davis is doing in literary politics. "[S]alvo, counter salvo, the sport of kings": leaving aside those implications of

Footnotes

80 cf. Leigh Davis, "Industry standards", *New Zealand Listener*, 6/7/85, p. 48.

81 Davis, "Set Up", p. 1.

machoism and material privilege, literature is a gamble, a race, a competition, with a high value placed on timing and manoeuvre; the winner, presumably, is he who becomes King, like Hemi in Grafton, or Baxter in the eyes of Loney.[82]

This art becomes contestatory, then, in the sense in which, say, a game of Monopoly is contestatory. Davis wants to buy up the board, to draw a circle around the landscape, but he imagines that landscape to be purely ludic. For all his fondness for combative metaphors, Davis settles for a hobbyist's approach to the question of language as an instrument of power. On the Monopoly board of salon culture, and despite the pretensions of "language" writing to an anti-authoritarian de-centring, he seems to acknowledge no misgivings about the implications of employing theoretical "technology" as a tool for subjugating an adversary. Nor do the military and/or imperialistic overtones of metaphors like "armature", "dominoes",[83] or for that matter "technology", appear to cause him the slightest anxiety. He prosecutes his own aggressive power politics as if innocent of the narrative implications, while at the same time he expresses no interest in re-siting (i.e. *outside* the salon) this contest between enunciating subject and object. Failing to acknowledge his embroilment in power, he cannot begin to account for the implications of where that power is directed. His assertion, then, about Allen Curnow, that "he has no coherent theory of literature, no conceptual place for literature to exist other

Footnotes

82 Loney, in "Talking with Alan Loney", pp. 50-51.

83 Davis, "Set Up": "Right at this point the discourse of the literature is vulnerable to being replaced, and like dominoes a whole set of related changes are seen to occur as a consequence." (p. 3)

than as a kind of lie",[84] has an application for his own interruption. He has a conceptual place for literature as a game, but none which will cut any ice with the likes of Hugh Lauder.

For a perspective on this, we need only compare a brace of Davis's metaphors with the way the same signifiers resonate in Wedde. Firstly, here is Davis on the McDonald's hamburger:

> Now you have this highly developed product which has come about as a result of a lot of R & D (research and development) and a lot of decision-making of a rich kind and McDonald's hamburgers are rich in implications. So I mean to develop a discourse capable of exploring those implications and locating the richness.[85]

For the Wedde of *Symme's Hole*, by contrast, this hamburger encases two centuries of imperialist exploitation, and stands as a symbol of our status as a "client dictatorship".[86] And Wedde would probably assent to a notion that the neo-mimetic neutrality of postmodernism is well-equipped to blind us to that same exploitation -- in other words, what kind of "neutrality" is it which focusses on that semiotic richness to the exclusion of any less tolerant reading of that decision-making?[87]

Similarly, consider what Davis means by "resistance":

Footnotes

84 Davis, "Solo Curnow", p. 61.
85 Davis, Lauder interview, p. 315.
86 Wedde, Dowling interview, p. 168.
87 On this question, see Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community" (Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* [Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983], pp. 135-159). Davis, of course, is familiar with all this, and his selection of the metaphor reads like a calculated affront to Wedde's iconography.

> If I find a text which has no resistance, it is like pushing on an open door and I don't find it rich and significant.[88]

"Resistance" is a touchstone for Davis, serving to differentiate the "transparent" text from that which, expanding on that verbal axis, "invit[es] linguisitic attention of a high order".[89] Beside it, let me set this jibe from *Willy's Gazette*:

> & when IW put the word out on FS how telling
> what a clever message notice on GAPS
> 'alertness and detachment' (gets maybe dreary)
> and parabolas, ghost-riders..
> all those slyly irrelevant seeming anecdotes
> wonder if he's got a trenchcoat (the writer)
> a drab wireless a French farmhouse? (59)

The allusion is to Wedde's *Listener* review of the omnibus edition of Sargeson's autobiography; the piece bears the headline "Frank's secret army", a title which points to its presiding metaphor:

> ... a Chaplinesque fifth-column, whose defense against the unwelcome interference of society's centre must often be comic, must always be alert, and is by nature detached.[90]

Which brings us back, in turn, to Davis's "drab wireless in a French farmhouse" (cf. "small primitive radios"). This [French] Resistance of Wedde/Sargeson is a counter-culture mobilised against the social centre. Davis's resistance is

Footnotes

88 Davis, Lauder interview, p. 313.

89 Davis, "Public Policy", p. 84. A recent Davis verse sequence is entitled "Resistance Leaders" (*Splash* 2, pp. 11-22).

90 Ian Wedde, "Frank's secret army", *New Zealand Listener*, 29/5/82, p. 84.

formalist high-tech, a gambit to be mobilised against a literary centre responsible for a failure of density and reflexivity. Wedde's secret army, expressively resisting, becomes Davis's centre, rehearsing its generic rituals, and in so doing identifies for us those "enemy lines" behind which Willy is to be inserted.

Davis has a fondness for Left-sounding jargon -- "work", "revolution", "praxis", "bourgeois" -- but this fancy dress fails to disguise the fact that his insurgency is fundamentally and exclusively aesthetic; his antagonist is not a brute political force, but a style, a posture of the literary centre which must be discredited before the child can usurp the place of the parent. As explained by Barthes, Davis's is the traditional foe of the avant-garde:

> True, there are revolts against bourgeois ideology. This is what one generally calls the avant-garde. But these revolts are socially limited, they remain open to salvage. First, because they come from a small section of the bourgeoisie itself, from a minority group of artists and intellectuals, without public other than the class which they contest, and who remain dependent on its money in order to express themselves. Then, these revolts always get their inspiration from a very strongly made distinction between the ethically and the politically bourgeois: what the avant-garde contests is the bourgeois in art or morals -- the shopkeeper, the Philistine, as in the heyday of Romanticism; but as for political contestation, there is none. What the avant-garde does not tolerate about the bourgeoisie is its language, not its status. This does not necessarily mean that it approves of this status; simply, it leaves it aside.[91]

Davis's conception of himself as an outsider, an insurgent, the flag-bearer of an outlaw discourse, depends on precisely this distinction between an aesthetic and a political centre. If

Footnotes

91 Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 139.

the centre of Seventies expressivism is a socially marginalised counter-culture, then radical chic demands that Davis, as insurgent, emplace himself in the socio-political centre -- that is to say, the aesthetic margins. Thus we can appreciate the full irony of the signature beneath the Horrocks article:

> Leigh Davis
> TREASURY[92]

Presumably this mailing address is intended as an affront to that myth of the artist as necessarily angst-ridden and garret-ensconced;[93] Horrocks and Davis, persons of their time, offer us an artist-as-hero for our time, springing up where (art) establishment mythology (Curnow's staunch modernism, say, or what Curnow *fils* calls Wedde's "counter-culture moralism")[94] leads us to expect him least.

This signature also points us towards what Lauder has in mind when he describes the *And* intervention as a "petit bourgeois palace putsch".[95] That is to say, it signals in addition an express refusal on the part of the theoretical entrepreneur-as-revolutionary to consider the relation of his literary revolution to life as it is lived outside the palace. The citadels of brute political power (TREASURY) become signifiers to be mobilised in a squabble over literary power, an art-world coup which expressly ignores the question of whose

Footnotes

92 "Roger's Thesaurus", p. 60.

93 As Davis is no doubt well aware, this gambit conjures a parallel with Eliot-the-banker in the London of the 1920s.

94 Wystan Curnow, "Speech Balloons & Conversation Bubbles", p. 129.

95 Hugh Lauder, "Editorial: A Personal View", *Landfall* 153, p. 5.

interests it serves in the world beyond the salon. Davis can advertise Treasury as his element and yet continue to valorise himself as an outlaw because power has been reduced to *literary* power and history to *literary* history. That laudable demand that the project remain "historically aware" degenerates into the display of datelines, while historical contest itself collapses into a competition to accumulate play money, this sport of kings less a gamble than a gambol because finally so little is at stake.

vi) *Permanent revolution*

Increasingly in this chapter I have appealed to Barthes, and the reader alert to that libidinal dynamic with which this thesis is so concerned will no doubt have concluded already that the move derives from a desire to score cheap points: since Barthes stands at the summit of Davis's hagiography ("Barthes was better than ten Frank Wrights" (91) etc), then to use Barthes against him appears gratifyingly wounding. But given that I may be compelled to use him anyway, it is nonetheless a most happy accident that no authority serves to make more clear than does Barthes the limits of Davis's appreciation of discourse as power.

The late text published as "Inaugural Lecture", as translated by Richard Howard, supplies Davis with epigraphs both for "Solo Curnow" and for the Wedde essay, "Public Policy". In interesting places in the latter, however, Davis

does not copy Howard's script faithfully. In the following, Davis's alterations are italicised in brackets:

> ...the only remaining alternative is, if I may say so, to cheat with speech, to cheat speech [*if I may say so, to cheat speech*]. This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech *outside the bounds of power*, in the splendor of a permanent revolution of language [*in the permanent splendor of a revolution of language*], I for one call *literature*.[96]

There is certainly room for speculation as to just how this miscarriage has occurred. Having ruled out the possibility that Davis is following a different translation or that he has re-translated Barthes for himself,[97] we seem to be left still with at least three options: it may be "simply" a piece of carelessness (i.e. we read it as a Freudian slip);[98] it may be a deliberate corruption on Davis's part, a piece of sophistical violence to which once more we can apply that Freudian reading; or finally, if we credit its author with an awareness of both the preceding possibilities, then it may in fact be an elaborate joke by Davis at his own expense. And yet finally this intentionalist speculation is unnecessary, for the fact remains that at one level or another Davis's text anticipates the whole of my critique. Announcing that he will "cheat with speech" in the elision of that very phrase, he then

Footnotes

96 Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", trans. Richard Howard, *A Barthes Reader*, p. 462; Davis, "Public Policy", p. 82.

97 The first option would appear to be ruled out by the fact that in "Solo Curnow" Davis follows Howard word for word; the second possibility is not supported by the original French (Roland Barthes, *Leçon* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978], p. 16).

98 This reading throws an interesting light on other typographical slips ("marshalls", "irresistable") which again occur in suggestive places.

performs this promised sleight of hand in the most revealing place we could imagine. His mis-application of that "splendor" is an admission that his literary revolution must founder through what I have been describing as a blindness to its own investment in power politics.

Barthes is of course appealing to that Maoist ideal of permanent ("perpetual") revolution: his point is precisely that a revolution's splendor is *anything but* permanent; the splendor can reside only in that permanence itself, in perpetual revolutionary vigilance. To understand why, we need firstly to consider what Barthes means by "outside the bounds of power" [*hors-pouvoir*]. The "Inaugural Lecture" marked his 1977 appointment to the Chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France. This chair, he suggests initially, represents a place outside those bounds;[99] immediately, however, he qualifies this statement:

> To teach or even to speak outside the limits of institutional sanction is certainly not to be rightfully and totally uncorrupted by power; power (the *libido dominandi*) is there, hidden in any discourse, even when uttered in a place outside the bounds of power. Therefore, the freer such teaching, the further we must inquire into the conditions and processes by which discourse can be disengaged from all will-to-possess.[100]

The most daunting obstacle to permanent revolution, and at the same time what makes that vigilance so imperative, is the fact that power inheres in discourse itself.[101]

Footnotes

99 Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", p. 458.
100 Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", p. 459.
101 "This object in which power is inscribed, for all of human eternity, is language, or to be more precise, its necessary expression: the language we speak and write." (Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", p. 460.)

Language, says Barthes, is "quite simply fascist", not because it prevents us from speaking but rather because it compels us to. He uses examples from his own tongue (I must choose between masculine and feminine, between *tu* and *vous* etc), but equally we might appeal to Wedde and his ironic recourse to "bad" grammar, where his replacement of a subject pronoun with an object (That's *me* trying to step out of that sentence) confesses his inability to escape the exercise of power in the subject position. Barthes, then, returns us to that country we traversed in mapping the subject-object manoeuvres of the Seventies:

> Thus, by its very structure my language implies an inevitable relation of alienation. To speak, and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate: the whole language is a generalized *rection*.[102]

Barthes, then, is severely mis-used by Davis. The latter's presumption is, I take it, that as a marginal, avant-garde publication, *And* is innocent of the kind of authority that inheres in the academic and literary centre. But that utopian realm to which Barthes refers as "outside the bounds of power" can only be reached by a gate so strait that we debar ourselves in the very act of acknowledging it. Concerning power, there is no meta-discourse:

> In speech, then, servility and power are inescapably intermingled. If we call freedom not only the capacity to escape power, but also and especially the capacity to subjugate no one, then freedom can only exist outside language.[103]

Footnotes

102 Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", p. 460.

This sobering observation opens a paragraph which ends with Davis's choice of epigraph -- an epigraph introducing an essay which illustrates this same point with admirable clarity. For to speak is to be empowered by the Law, deputised, co-opted by it. *Sententia*, that act of penal speech, is ineluctably punitive. As Davis's attack on Wedde and Wedde's "bad grammar" joke, alike, remind us, the moment we enter discourse we enter its servitude: we are sentenced to pass sentence.

Steering Barthes ahead of me, I am able to rearrange my quarrel with Davis: it is not, after all, that he fetishises language so much as that he underestimates it. As the song says, to live outside the Law you must be honest. This necessary, if not sufficient, condition instructs us firstly to recognise that in mobilising discourse we mobilise the power structure that inheres in it. The less we are aware of this, the more surely power will usurp our utterance, and confirm itself with it, and turn it against us. Nowhere does this show more clearly, of course, than in this thesis. Having brought it to the point where my own imperatives demand that I abjure and abandon it, I discover too late that my own investment in the institution which sponsors it demands, not only that I complete and submit it, but that in so doing I commit it to the public theatre. Thus I must resign myself to reaffirming the discourse of the academic centre, and at the cost of writing over the texts of others, and of betraying my own desires in all their brutality, their *irascibility*, their peevishness.

And it helps not at all to invoke some stalking horse, be

Footnotes

103 Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", p. 461.

it Lacan, or Lauder, or Barthes, or by other expedients of syntax or modality[104] to attempt to empty out the subject position. It is no use, either, to try to find new tenants for the object position: whomever we place there will suffer our domination -- even a self-reflexive "you", harbouring as it must (in its inevitable over-determination) our own private gallery of oedipal ghosts.[105] There are tricks we can play (like Curnow, like Davis) with that subtle fascism of the first person plural and a range of associated nervous noises ("of course", "clearly", "obviously" are among the most frequently used in these pages), but none of this spurious collectivity will ever disguise the insecurity of our pronouncements or the extent to which "I" still bears down on "you".

Unable to conceal that "I", not only can I never plead innocence, but nor can I find safety. It will not help, that is, to hide behind God, the imperial self, language, or metaphors like "trajectory": such fabrications and fetishes merely serve our own libidinal ends, and when pressured they give up, not only that "I", but with it an epistemological fraudulence. This is simply to reiterate that I am not safe from speaking my own desire: even a formalism as stringent as Davis's is only one more guise of the Freudian censor. The implacable possessiveness of speech is born in desire, where speech itself is born, and to mobilise that scavenging "I" is always to constellate the map of my own hunger. This is where

Footnotes

104 Barthes: "An absurd remedy, everyone would surely agree, to add to each sentence some little phrase of uncertainty, as if anything that came out of language could make language tremble." (*Roland Barthes*, p. 48) Also, cf. "Inaugural Lecture", p. 461.

105 Barthes: "Once uttered, even in the subject's deepest privacy, speech enters the service of power." ("Inaugural Lecture", p. 461.)

the ladders of speech all start. This is where the subject, indentured to the sentence, writes out the terms of its enslavement by the will-to-possess.

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